

A NEW TEACHING WITH AUTHORITY

A Re-evaluation of the Authority of the Bible

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At the middle of the twentieth century, Rudolf Bultmann, drawing upon the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, argued very convincingly that the Bible deserved no "special hermeneutics" designed for reading and interpreting it alone; it should, instead, he asserted, be treated exactly as one would treat any other ancient text.¹ Whether persuaded by—or even aware of—Bultmann's views or not, most biblical scholarship of the last fifty years has followed his lead. Methods and approaches drawn from other disciplines, like history, literature, sociology, and anthropology, and regularly applied to other ancient texts, dominate the current study of the Bible in the United States and Europe. Even many of the self-consciously indigenous liberation theologies of the third world owe a considerable debt to major European intellectual theories like Marxism or to other traditions of textual analysis prominent in their own cultural settings. In the modern scholarly world, Bultmann's proscription against isolating the interpretation of the Bible from all other intellectual systems or insisting on a special method of reading suitable only for it has certainly won the day.

Moreover, because modern scholarship forms and informs those who teach the Bible in colleges, universities, and seminaries, this "general hermeneutics" approach to the Bible has deeply influenced pedagogical practices. Even in most confessional educational settings, explicating the Bible as literature and history accompanies whatever more devotional or spiritual perspectives are employed in teaching it. The character of the Bible as a collection of ancient texts from different cultures and different historical periods, and the importance of understanding the Bible using the methods of interpretation applicable to other similar texts, seem to be widely supported conventions of study and teaching in most colleges, universities, and seminaries in this country.

However, if one looks at the way many modern Christians and major church groups or denominations often employ the Bible in public debates, especially those debates over social and ethical issues, one generally finds a different set of reading conventions being employed, a set of conventions pro-

foundly molded by claims for the Bible's normative or authoritative status. Moreover, this authoritative manner of reading the Bible insists on distinguishing it from all other ancient texts as a work inspired in one way or another by a Divine Author.² Thus, it is a unique text, so it is claimed, and the way it is to be read must be *similarly unique*. In other words, the Bible requires precisely the "special hermeneutics" that Bultmann argued so elegantly against in his essay. Bultmann's essay, "Das Problem der Hermeneutik," was itself, of course, an attempt to counter the special reading practices proposed by Karl Barth in his dogmatic approach to the Bible.³ Almost fifty years after his article and regardless of the pedagogical and research practices of most biblical scholars before and since it was written, the bifurcation, which Bultmann faced at mid-century, between the "general hermeneutics" approach to the Bible advanced by scholarship and the "special hermeneutics" taught by many ecclesiastical bodies continues to reign supreme.

In this essay, I want to explore not the reading conventions of biblical scholarship, but instead the dynamics and results of reading the Bible as many in church communities are encouraged to hear it, as a "teaching with authority." What happens to biblical texts when they are circumscribed by a discourse of authority? What are some of the elements of the "special hermeneutics" still so prevalent in dogmatic considerations of the Bible, and what effects have they had on the way the Bible has been taught to and used by many within the churches, especially in public debates on social issues? I must confess that part of the impetus for this reflection comes from my increasing frustration over the apparent inability of biblical scholarship to influence current popular understandings of Christianity and from my perplexity at what laity and pastors, who have been educated in the historical, literary, and sociological milieu of the biblical world and biblical literature, do or do not do when they leave their college or seminary classrooms and enter their church communions. There appear to be (at least) two separate discourses about the Bible present in American society, the historical and literary discourse of scholarship and the authoritative discourse of the churches. This is not to say that some important denominations and individual church groups are not profoundly influenced in their understanding of the Bible by the past several centuries of biblical scholarship, nor is it to say that there are no biblical scholars who participate both personally and professionally in promoting discourses of authority and normativity. My claim is only that the dominant form of hermeneutics used by most biblical scholars in research and teaching, as witnessed, for example, by professional journals, papers delivered at international, national, and regional Society of Biblical Literature meetings, and discussions on the practices of teaching, is markedly different from the dominant form of hermeneutics found in most ecclesiastical bodies. And, whatever else it may rest upon, this difference certainly has to do with claims of authority and normativity.

In pursuing this reflection, I will look first at the history of doctrines concerning the authority of the Bible; then I will review briefly some of the effects of authoritative readings on public debates over social and ethical issues, and from that review begin to sketch the conventions of reading the Bible which

this "special hermeneutics" requires. Finally, I will suggest an alternative view of the function of the Bible in the church, which attempts to bridge the present bifurcation between the scholarly and ecclesiastical patterns of reading.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF DOCTRINES OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

Although the texts of the Christian canon have demonstrated the rhetorical power of their narrative worlds on generations of believers, and they have certainly had profound formational impact on the evolution of Christian piety and discourse from the early centuries of the Common Era, the development of doctrines concerning the authority of the Bible, which in some sense fix or legalize the rhetorical and formational importance of the Bible,⁴ are of more recent origin. For the most part their production evolved after the Reformation period when the doctrine of *sola scriptura* came to the forefront of Christian, especially Protestant Christian, debate. Moreover, not only were such doctrines relatively late bloomers, coming mostly from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they were also contrived in very problematic ways. A number of scholars in recent years, most notably James Barr in several publications,⁵ have pointed to difficulties in the formulations and uses of Protestant doctrines of biblical authority. The foremost problem, stated in its baldest form, is that orthodox Protestant doctrines of taking the Bible as the ultimate authority in all doctrinal matters cannot *itself be verified from the Bible*. The "biblical world," that historical period in which God's revelation occurred as witnessed by the biblical writings, *antedates* those writings themselves. The Word of God did not come to Isaiah as a document to be interpreted, and although Jesus and Paul, the major characters in the "New Testament period" had, unlike Moses and Isaiah, a scriptural tradition to use, the freedom with which they altered it, repudiated it, or interpreted it is striking.⁶ Indeed, James Dunn, in arguing for an evangelical perspective on the authority of the Bible based on "the New Testament attitude to, and use of, scripture" must deny "that Christians today can necessarily treat the scriptures . . . with the same sovereign freedom exercised by Jesus and Paul,"⁷ thus leaving evangelicals in the contradictory position of both appealing to the New Testament as norm and at the same time denying the current applicability of what is found there. The problem, seen in relation to the specific issue of canon, can also be found in chapter I of the seventeenth-century Westminster Confession, the document upon which the Reformed tradition continues to base its doctrine of scriptural authority: The Confession states that only the sixty-six books of the (Protestant) canon compose scripture as inspired by God and therefore provide the sole basis of all doctrinal formulation; yet, *no* passage in any of those sixty-six books provides a list of which texts are inspired, or which are not, nor is there a numerical limit to that group.⁸ Evidence for the canon of scripture and its precise limits can only be found *outside* the canon!

In addition to this major doctrinal difficulty of being unable to ground the authority of scripture in scripture itself, most formulations of the doctrine of biblical authority evince obvious inconsistencies by tending to see some ele-

ments of scripture as more authoritative than others. The "canon within a canon" pattern is quite ancient and could, in fact, claim as scriptural warrant the story of Jesus' declaration of the two great commandments, love of God and love of neighbor, as the essence of all the law and the prophets (Matt. 22:36-40). Luther's view of Christian salvation as "by grace through faith" had the effect of elevating the writings of Paul and dooming the Epistle of James, among others, to ridicule or oblivion. One might then suppose that the point of developing a doctrine of biblical authority was to underline major themes within biblical material as essential to Christian faith today. However, James Barr has argued quite persuasively that the main reason was precisely the contrary: traditional Protestant orthodoxy needed the authority of an inspired canon, not to emphasize dominant biblical patterns, but rather to elevate as essential theological beliefs "elements which had comparatively slight and even marginal representation within the biblical material: the virgin birth, predestination, the inspiration of scripture."⁹ Consequently, the *doctrine of biblical authority* supplies ecclesiastical bodies with power to proclaim as normative Christian belief, not love of God and love of neighbor, but those peripheral and "thinly evidenced" (by one, two, or three separate proof texts) issues like the inspiration of scripture, the legality of slavery, or the sinfulness of homosexuality. Moreover, because these elements are often so rarely addressed within the canon as a whole, both changing social values within the broader, contemporary society and dissenting interpretations by other Christian groups can sometimes erase or deny formerly "essential" biblical teachings (e.g., "slaves obey your masters" or the definition of predestination). Thus, the *doctrine of biblical authority* has generally functioned to assure not the continuing importance of widely attested or programmatic themes in scripture, but rather the divine inspiration of the tenuous and the marginal. Indeed, from just a superficial overview of Christian history since the Reformation, the invocation of the tenet of biblical authority has been remarkably negative; that is, it has been employed most often to *exclude* certain groups or people,¹⁰ to *pass judgment* on various disapproved activities,¹¹ and to *justify* morally or historically debatable positions.¹² I am *not* saying that the Bible has been primarily negative in its influence over the centuries, for that assertion would be easily challenged by the lives of many good-hearted Christians, working for peace, liberation, justice, and human salvation, who have drawn much of their inspiration from the Bible. Nor am I arguing that attempts to formulate the place of the Bible theologically in relation to the Christian life have always arisen from necessarily exclusivistic aims,¹³ although that might well sometimes have been the case. It is not the Bible itself but the overt, often institutionally based appeal to an already formulated *doctrine of biblical authority* that displays this generally negative, exclusivistic pattern. It is this use of biblical authority by various ecclesiastical bodies, especially in contemporary situations, that requires serious investigation.

THE USE OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY IN THE SOCIAL ARENA

While it is certainly true that many saintly and influential people as diverse as

Mother Teresa, Albert Schweitzer, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., have found inspiration for liberation, justice, and mercy in the pages of the Bible, its institutional, authoritative use in some of the most important social and ethical conflicts in recent American history has often pitted the Bible against those struggling for equality and human dignity. A few examples will suffice to illustrate this disturbing point.

William Lloyd Garrison, one of the founders and most important figures in the abolitionist movement of the 1830s and 40s became convinced of the abomination of slavery out of his connection with the Great Revival movements of the nineteenth century. Garrison and his followers found in the Bible, from cover to cover, a total repudiation of the practice of slavery. In the early 1830s, Garrison clearly believed that the spirit of the Bible "spoke with such unequivocal authority against slave owning that no sincere Christian, whether minister or lay person, could fail to be persuaded."¹⁴ But fail they did. Instead of embracing this liberative reading of the spirit of the Bible, white ministers and lay Christians in both the South and the North contested Garrison's interpretations of scripture by pointing to the many instances in both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament where slave holding was simply taken as a fact of life. And more than that, did not Paul (or his followers) on several occasions actually instruct slaves to obey their masters? Whether or not slavery violated the "spirit" of the Bible, it most certainly did *not* violate many elements of its "letter." Consequently, by 1837, Garrison was so disgusted by this "Christian" response to the moral suasion of abolitionism that he renounced the validity of scripture, the authority of ministers, and deemed all organized religion as "pernicious" and "malevolent."¹⁵ A movement that started as a response to the moral vision of revivalism and the Bible ended up attacking the Bible and organized Christianity in general as its arch enemy in the quest for human freedom. In the slavery debates, the weight of biblical authority was clearly on the side of systems of oppression.

Much the same experience, I believe, has faced women of all races in both the earlier suffrage movement and the more recent feminist movement in this country. Without question many Christian women, and I would count myself among them, recognize their formation in the biblical tradition as one of the prime roots of their social activism. From the prophets' calls for justice and liberation to Jesus' welcoming of women and men to follow him and become part of the family of God, Jewish and Christian feminists have found inspiration, hope, and courage in the texts of the Bible. Yet, like the earlier abolitionists, they have also found there the warrants for much of their second-class treatment in Western society. Conservative church leaders and many others, not especially interested in Christianity but very concerned to preserve their own privileges, quote the Bible's many injunctions against the full enfranchisement of women: women should keep silent in the church, women should not be allowed to teach men, women are the possessions of their fathers and husbands, women are sexually promiscuous, women are responsible for the Fall of humanity, etc. And did not Paul (or his followers) on several occasions actually instruct women to obey their husbands, since their husbands were their

heads as Christ was the head of the church? Although there are some positive descriptions of individual women in the Bible (Deborah, Hulda, Junica, Priscilla, etc.), the preponderance of biblical material in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament presents women in subordinate, passive, victimized, or less-than-fully-human roles. Thus, the Bible serves to naturalize and authorize the misogynous estimation of all women as victims, servants, or seductresses—ones whose control by others is always appropriate.

In both the public debates over slavery and those over the secondary standing of women, the Bible actually provides abundant material to justify the continuation of systems of exploitation and abuse. Even the detestable use by the Nazis of the New Testament invective against the Pharisees to defend their monstrous policy of Jewish extermination rests on a frighteningly ample biblical base. However, in the current debate over homosexuality, the Bible has very little to say at all—though you certainly would not know it from listening to many church leaders, both fundamentalist and mainline. In this case especially, the use of claims to biblical authority for supporting textually tenuous positions is manifestly apparent. At the most generous estimate, the entire Bible contains only nine brief references to homoeroticism, six in the Hebrew Bible and three in the New Testament, occupying in all less than twelve verses of text. And even those numbers are misleading, since four of the references in the Hebrew Bible (Deut. 23:17, I Kings 14:24, I Kings 22:46, II Kings 23:7) may actually simply be prohibitions against prostitution by men and women¹⁶ and two of the references in the New Testament (1 Cor. 6:9-11 and 1 Tim. 1:10) are based on interpretations of Greek words whose exact meanings are actually unknown or unclear.¹⁷ This leaves only the two references in the Holiness Code of Leviticus (18:19-23 and 20:10-16) and Paul's one assertion in Romans as to what he thinks is "natural" and "unnatural" (the only citation in the Bible that even mentions female homoeroticism, if that is indeed what it is about¹⁸) as the sole biblical witnesses for a modern Christian rejection of homosexuality. Jesus in the gospels says absolutely nothing about the subject, and indeed if you define homosexuality as people of the same gender living together, loving and caring for each other in a primary relationship, Jesus' relationship to his male disciples, as it is depicted in all four of the canonical gospels, would clearly fit the definition. After all, most of the people Jesus is said to love in the Bible are other men. However we understand the portrayal of Jesus' own intimate preferences, his teachings about divorce, for example, are much less ambiguous, more heavily attested, and much clearer than anything the New Testament has to say about homoeroticism. Yet, most Protestant denominations which will not ordain openly homosexual people, supposedly because of biblical authority, are quite willing to ordain divorced people. It is the appalling hypocrisy of such use of biblical authority that makes the current church debates over homosexuality so invidious and so infuriating.

In the cases of all three of these recent social movements for human liberation, the repressive role of the Bible in public discussions of who, in a democratic society, should have inalienable rights and who should not, is remarkable and gives ample evidence of the easy complicity of the Bible with systems of exploita-

tion, exclusion, and death. This complicity, I want to argue, cannot be dismissed as solely the result of deliberate and selective misinterpretations of biblical texts. Most repressive interpretations, though certainly not all, are instead generally defensible readings of what the text says and indeed what it probably said to its ancient audiences. I think Paul did believe that slaves should be faithful to their owners and that wives should be subordinate to their husbands. He also probably thought relations between women or between men were “unnatural,” though his understanding of what was “natural” in sexual relations was likely quite different from contemporary views, since sexual relations in antiquity were constructed primarily in terms of social status rather than gender.¹⁹ The pressing question is not whether Paul believed these things, but whether or not we do. Are slavery, the subordination of women, or the “natural” sexuality of dominance and submission what Christians in a democratic society of the late twentieth century ought to believe and want to preach to others?

The Bible, of course, does not come from a democratic society of the late twentieth century. It was formed in the profoundly hierarchical and patriarchal cultures of the ancient Hebrews and the early Christians, and much of the negative role of the Bible in contemporary public debates arises precisely from this formation. The Bible, like any other book, is saturated by the social, cultural, political, and religious understandings of the peoples who produced it. They lived in a strictly hierarchical world order with the king, the high priest, or the emperor at the top of a pyramid of power; in the early Roman period when the texts of the New Testament were written, the family was to be a microcosm of the empire, with the *pater familias*, the father, at the top, and his wives, children, and slaves in ordered sequence beneath him. Every page of the Bible is shaped by similar social and cultural conventions. However, unlike all other books so shaped, in the modern ecclesiastical world this ancient Bible often participates in an institutional discourse of authority and control, is viewed as normative by some Christians, and is revered as an icon by many others. One result of granting transcendent, authoritative status to this text is that we are also granting normative status to the hierarchical, patriarchal worldview of the first millennium B.C.E. and the first centuries C.E., since the regulations and stories of the Bible cannot be abstracted from the languages, cultural views, and social practices of their contexts of production. But if we no longer have kings or emperors, should we insist on keeping slaves or subordinating women? Do the legitimate fears of a marginal tribal society for its survival, which influenced its many prohibitions about wasting “the seed,” really provide any rationale whatsoever, in our seriously overpopulated world, for modern discrimination against homosexuals?

Moreover, the authoritative use of the hierarchical, patriarchal organization of the biblical world has not only promoted the negative role of the Bible in public social debates, it has also had, I would argue, detrimental effects on the structures of contemporary Christian communities. While it is certainly true that all social affiliations involve relations of power, hierarchy organizes these generally fluid power relations vertically in such a way that those few at the top dispose a disproportionate amount of power in relation to the much

larger groups below them. In addition, I understand the word “patriarchal,” a word that has been rightly criticized recently by some feminists, to refer to those social structures that freeze power relations and ascribe them rigidly to set groups within the culture, reserving the most powerful positions for the most economically privileged males of the dominant race or ethnic group. Many modern Christian communities use the hierarchical, patriarchal structures of the biblical world as models for structuring their own fellowships. In my view such modeling is extremely dangerous, for it fosters, among other things, the increasing and lamentable chasm between clergy and laity, church boards and the people they serve. And worse still, it advances the pervasive and demoralizing attitude of regarding laity as passive, perpetual children sunk in theological and spiritual inertia who need to be superintended, often very patronizingly, by spiritually superior clergy. Furthermore, because of the permanent, disproportionate power placed in the hands of clergy, they are elevated to a spiritual pedestal that virtually assures their inability to be honest about their own lives with their congregations or, all too often, even with themselves. Nor are their continually infantile parishioners, always subject to the judgment and reprimand accorded children, in any better shape. Along with theologian Rebecca Chopp,²⁰ I would assert that one of the most disturbing aspects of contemporary Christian life is that churches today are not places in which people are free to speak the truth about their own lives.

All of these communal and social difficulties I have just illustrated—and many I have not—accompany the invocation of the doctrine of biblical authority. By looking closely at these examples and others, we can begin to uncover some of the conventions presupposed by the “special hermeneutics” adopted for reading the Bible as authoritative or normative.

THE “SPECIAL HERMENEUTICS” OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

We have already observed that appeals to the doctrine of biblical authority tend to be mounted only in situations of a conflict of viewpoints, usually to exclude what some powerful members of a religious community take to be threatening beliefs by those both within and outside the community. It is important to notice that issues upon which most of the community or denomination agree, whether approved within the biblical text or—most revealingly—disapproved within the text (e.g., divorce, usury), are never discussed under the rubric of biblical authority. Moreover, perspectives championed in the Bible, which many modern Christian communities reject as inappropriate (e.g., polygamy, slavery, specific hair lengths for men and women, communal ownership of property), are also rarely the subject of discussions of biblical authority. In the case of these latter concerns especially, the historical conditionedness of the biblical text is often raised as a reason for ignoring embarrassing biblical mandates; in other words, with texts deemed to be out of step with modern ethical and theological sensibilities, employing the “general hermeneutics” approach of biblical scholarship is perfectly acceptable. Thus, the “special hermeneutics” of biblical authority or normativity

is not the constant practice of any ecclesiastical community,²¹ but rather a practice employed only in certain selected moments of division and debate. When biblical authority is invoked, it profoundly affects the way in which the Bible is read and understood. This “special hermeneutics” has at least four major practices that distinguish it sharply from the general way in which other ancient texts are read: First, it is ahistorical; second, it idealizes and normativizes antique society; third, it isolates texts from their contexts; and finally, it insists on one correct reading of the text. Let us look in more detail at each of these practices.

The Historical Versus the Transcendent Text

To claim that a text written almost two to three thousand years ago has authority over the lives and actions of people in the present, or further, to claim that it establishes norms which all people in all cultures at all times in all circumstances should obey, one must assume that the text itself in some very real sense transcends history. If its words and views are timeless, applicable to all occasions, then it must not in any way be limited or even conditioned by its own historical society, its own cultural period, or its own individual context of production. It is truly and radically ahistorical. Even the works of Plato and Aristotle, works which have had an immense influence on the development of Western philosophy and science, are not viewed in such an ethereal light. While some of their positions may be respected and even adopted as insightful, it is always with the full awareness of their historical and cultural limitations. In other words, one can *argue* with the viewpoints of Plato and Aristotle or Cicero and Virgil; one can analyze and critique their assertions; one can assess their value for living in a radically different historical context. Arguing with, analyzing, critiquing, and assessing the ancient mandates of the Bible are not permitted in the “special hermeneutics” of biblical authority. Instead, the biblical text—or a selected portion of it—is raised to the level of transcendence of its Divine Author, omniscient and omni-relevant.²²

While such a claim assures the authority of every element of the text, it also necessitates a selective blindness to those texts that modern sensibilities eschew,²³ as we noted above. In addition, it requires considerable interpretative creativity to find guidance in scripture for those issues undreamt of in the ancient Mediterranean world (e.g., cloning, atomic weapons, space travel, television, *in vitro* fertilization, etc.) or considerable interpretative latitude to fit ancient perspectives to modern constructs (e.g., ancient views on money and commerce to modern venture capitalism, ancient practices of kingship to modern presidential and parliamentary democracies, ancient understandings of homoeroticism to modern homosexuality, ancient ideas about begging to modern concerns with homelessness and welfare, etc.). Indeed, the very need for such creativity and latitude itself tends to undercut seriously the claim for the transcendence of the text. In dealing with contemporary concerns, the Bible all too often seems thoroughly historically constrained. The covert, if not overt, recognition of that constraint is one reason the “special hermeneutics”

of authority is rarely ever the sole hermeneutical position adopted by an ecclesiastical body, even though logically it should be the only option, if, indeed, the Bible is the normative, transcendent text it is claimed to be.

The Worldview of Modernity Versus the Worldview of Antiquity

Ironically, the denial of the historical conditionedness of biblical material claimed as normative or authoritative actually serves to leave in place the pervasive shaping of biblical material by its ancient cultural and social worldview. In assuming the direct applicability of the text to any contemporary context, one is required to ignore the specific ancient Mediterranean cultural views that underpin the text's meaning and function. While obvious issues like monetary systems, political structures, and social customs are often easy to recognize and sometimes neutralize by compensation,²⁴ far more influential and pervasive cultural ideologies are sometimes much less noticeable and almost impossible to neutralize. For instance, Paul's rejection of homoeroticism in Romans 1:26 is profoundly dependent on the pervasive Jewish and gentile view in the first century C.E. of the inferiority of women. What makes relations between men and between women "unnatural" is the requirement that a man, who is "naturally" dominant, be submissive *like a woman*, or that a woman, who is "naturally" submissive, be dominant *like a man*. It is the underlying cultural imperative that men are dominant and superior while women are submissive and inferior—and never the twain shall meet—that stands as the foundation to Paul's views.²⁵ Applying Paul's words on homoeroticism directly to the present carries along with it this undergirding belief in female inferiority because one position is dependent upon the other.²⁶

The importation of the hierarchical and patriarchal worldview of Mediterranean antiquity into the present as a normative ideal has had many destructive effects on the church and on society, as we illustrated earlier. Though some people prosper under this ideology—mainly the most powerful men in the dominant racial or ethnic group—and, thus, considerable pressure is always at work to keep it in place, most people are reduced to some inferior or subservient status. Besides the advantage it bestows on an elite minority by privileging them, it is hard to understand why the worldview of a certain historical period in antiquity should become the norm for all time. I suppose it could be argued theologically that since Jesus entered history at a certain particular moment, that particular culture and society must hold some distinctive status for Christians. However, I would want to point out that the society and culture into which he was born was also the society and culture that crucified him and persecuted many of his earliest followers. Indeed, the Jesus of the canonical gospels expends much of his ministry on breaking down the social, religious, and status boundaries which permitted some to claim power and superiority over all others in that historical period. The sad irony is that by idealizing the worldview of the Bible, we establish as a modern norm that very world the Jesus of the gospels challenged to the point that it responded by murdering him.

Finally, reading biblical passages as authoritative and normative for present

situations has the tendency to distort the present in order to make it “fit” the biblical injunction. The present situation must often be mythologized, purposely misconstrued, or greatly simplified to bring out its supposed parallels with the biblical text being used. For example, the complex biological, theological, and ethical issues surrounding the development of a fetus from conception to birth must be utterly simplified in order for anti-abortionists to claim the biblical authority of “You shall not kill” (Exodus 20:13) as applicable to the decision of a mother to abort at the earliest stages of pregnancy. The ambiguity of the actual situation must be denied for the sake of biblical authority. Or, the mythology of women as nurturing, retiring, and passive beings must be imposed over the contemporary reality of women as able leaders in politics, business, education, and other important areas of public life in order for the biblical mandate against women having authority over men (1 Timothy 2:12) to be used to justify the denial of women’s ordination. Because the normative assertion must always be that of the Bible, the present actual situation has at best secondary status. Indeed, in some cases the normative authority granted to the Bible is used to judge lived experience as evil and rebellious or just misguided—thus, women who want to be ordained are labeled prideful sinners or mistaken children rather than appreciated as passionate believers who have heard a spiritual call from God. Consequently, the “special hermeneutics” of authority can re-interpret negatively events people themselves experience as spiritually compelling or life-giving. At the very least, it often shields or prevents us from seeing and dealing with the full reality of our present condition.

Contextual Reading Versus Strings of Quotations

“Proof-texting” is a reading strategy which Christians who appeal to biblical authority are often accused of practicing. In its most extreme and caricatured form, it is a practice of interpreting tiny fragments of scripture in complete isolation from—and sometimes in opposition to—their context. By pulling a few words or a verse completely out of any biblical context and placing them in some other context altogether, the Bible can literally be made to prove anything at all.²⁷ Although this radical level of proof-texting is the image that often stands behind the condemnation of the practice, to be fair it is relatively rare in most Christian communities, except for the extreme fundamentalist fringe. However, proof-texting in the more general sense of using only small portions of scripture out of the context of their overall narrative or poetic frameworks, is a regular feature of the “special hermeneutics” of biblical authority and constitutes a way of reading quite different from the ways in which other texts are read.

The dynamics of reading have been at the center of much research in the humanities over the past twenty-five years or so.²⁸ While conventions of reading vary from culture to culture and from historical period to historical period, reading in the present is generally understood as a sequential process of making meaning. In the terms used by Hans-Georg Gadamer, the “horizon” of the reader must merge with the “horizon” of the text²⁹ for communication to

occur, and the horizon of the text is built up in the sequential process of reading. Moreover, such horizons are always fluid, always changing as the reading process continues, with the fullest comprehension of the text's horizon coming only at its end, since each new event or episode may alter the way one views the whole. For example, if one were only to look at the characterization of the twelve male disciples in the Gospel of Mark in its first three chapters, one would view them as totally positive characters, called by Jesus and specially designated to be with him. However, as one reads on, that totally positive evaluation begins to erode as the twelve continue to disbelieve and misunderstand Jesus' words and actions until in the end they are the ones who flee from him, betray him to his enemies, and deny their association with him. By the end of the gospel, one's evaluation of the twelve is very different from what it was after only three chapters; one's understanding of the text's horizon has, in fact, changed dramatically. Even in other genres of literature besides narrative, the cumulative effect of the whole process deeply affects one's understanding of the importance and value of each individual element.³⁰ It is for this reason that literary critics insist on the importance of the *context* of every word, phrase, and text for its interpretation.

The "special hermeneutics" of biblical authority interrupts and distorts this contextual process of meaning making. Because every word of scripture is authoritative in itself and because the formation and use of biblical authority has so elevated the importance of "thinly evidenced" material, the conventional practice of taking only a portion of a text as its full meaning is the common practice of reading the Bible as authoritative. While the more responsible forms of this practice may well consider the immediate surrounding material, they rarely, if ever, consider the overarching work as a whole. This truncated form of reading is unique to the Bible and could perhaps be seen as the radicalization and formalization of the long tradition of lectionary reading. However, lectionary readings generally place small portions of biblical text—usually, though not always, complete episodes, poems, parables, oracles, etc.—into the context of worship, often with some homiletic reflection on them, while the "special hermeneutics" of biblical authority tends instead to associate small portions of text—often only a verse or two taken out of an episode or other formal unit—with other small portions of scripture taken from different locations altogether. For example, in arguing that women should not be ordained, those using biblical authority might point to the gospels to show that Jesus did not designate any women among his special twelve disciples, to 1 Timothy to confirm that women should not have authority over men, and to Genesis 2-3 to indicate that woman is created from man as his "helpmate"; or, in asserting that gay men and lesbians are practicing a sinful "lifestyle," they might point to the Holiness Code in Leviticus 18-20 for the "abomination of male with male," Paul's comment in Romans 1:26 for the sin of "unnatural" relations, and to Genesis 1-3 for confirmation of male and female relations as the created norm. This pasting together or stringing together of references is one of the most common conventions of the special hermeneutics of biblical authority.

The overarching context of each element in these strings of texts is usually ignored or only minimally acknowledged; in fact, the elements in each string actually function as the interpretative context for each other. In other words, in this special reading strategy, Leviticus 18-20 becomes the primary context for understanding Romans 1:26 and *vice versa*, or 1 Timothy 2:12 becomes the context for Jesus' action of calling disciples in the gospels and *vice versa*.³¹ Because contexts are so important in how one understands the meaning of a text, this procedure of creating strings of texts tends to be self-fulfilling; that is, the texts reaffirm the beliefs guiding the process that selected them in the first place. Indeed, it could be argued that this practice of stringing together disparate quotations is actually a process of creating an altogether new text.

The justification for this odd process of reading comes again from the affirmation that God is the Author of scripture. While that affirmation for most Christians does not entail a word-for-word dictation process, it does mean that all of scripture is in some sense the product of the Divine Mind and Will. One then only needs to proclaim that the Divine Mind must be of one piece to proclaim that material scattered in many different locations in scripture and used for many different purposes carries a basically consistent set of meanings. A similar argument stood as the foundation of another ancient form of reading the Bible, harmonization. Since the Bible was believed to be the definitive revelation of the Eternal and Unchanging God, whatever was found in one place could be used to complement different material found in another place. As Barr illustrates, "Though it was possible to write a Gospel which did not mention the Virgin Birth, the mention of it, where it *was* mentioned, was allowed to complement the non-mention of it elsewhere."³² Varying reports of the same event were understood to supplement each other rather than contradict or undercut each other. Hence, biblical material could be added all together to form a harmonized reading of the whole.³³ While their justification rests on a similar foundation, the "special hermeneutics" of authority differs from harmonization in that it makes no attempt to discern the meaning of the "whole." Indeed, as we have just argued, it fragments the holistic horizon of a text or of scripture in order to recontextualize small portions of scripture into authoritative strings of text.

Multiple Meanings Versus a Correct, Single Meaning

In Gadamer's version of the process of reading, meaning occurs when the horizon of the reader merges with the horizon of the text. This way of understanding reading emphasizes the importance of the reader in the process. While an author creates a text according to the conventions of his/her own language group and culture, the meaning of that text is construed by readers according to the conventions of their language group and culture. A similar point is made in recent cultural theory: for a communicative event to occur, the production or encoding of a discursive form must result in its translation or decoding.³⁴ The recipient of a discourse, whether a reader, hearer, or viewer must decode the message for any transmission of meaning to have taken

place. This dependence on readers for the construal of meaning points to one of the reasons for the existence of multiple interpretations of the same text. Different readers merge their own different horizons, their different life experiences, with that of the text, inevitably resulting in different construals of meaning. In addition, as cultural theorists point out, the practices of encoding and decoding “do not constitute an ‘immediate identity’” because they are rarely “perfectly symmetrical.”³⁵ Thus, since readers also develop the horizon of the text as they read or decode it, the lack of symmetry between the encoding and decoding of a discursive form becomes yet another source of multiple meanings. The cultural, social, and linguistic codes used by the producer of the text can be quite distant from those of its recipient. Readers attribute meaning to the text as they sequentially develop its horizon on the basis of conventional cultural strategies of reading that they have been taught, cultural strategies which themselves change over different historical periods and in different social sub-groups within any historical period. Consequently, reading itself, as expressed in the language of semiotics, “is a process of making meaning, a process of sign production where the reader actively attributes significance to signifiers on the basis of previously learned cultural codes.”³⁶ From the merging of their own horizons to their construction of the text’s horizon, readers at the very least must be considered co-creators of the meaning of any text, and some reader-response critics and deconstructionists would go considerably further by arguing that no text exists until a reader construes its meaning.

The history of the interpretation of the Bible provides ample proof of the influential role of the reader or community of readers in the construction of the text’s meaning. Looking at the history of interpretation of the Bible from the early church to the present and observing the many different ways the same texts have been understood—allegorically, typologically, literally, symbolically, historically³⁷—it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that even biblical meaning in some very significant ways is, and always has been, reader-dependent. Such a conclusion seems eminently reasonable from the standpoint of the “general hermeneutics” of contemporary biblical scholarship because all texts are capable of being construed in multiple ways; the Bible is just one more vivid instance of this general rule.

For the “special hermeneutics” of authority, however, the suggestion that the Bible may legitimately mean different things to different people is impossible to accept. It challenges the whole basis of using the Bible as a clear source of authoritative mandates and norms. Moreover, it raises a serious point overlooked in most arguments about biblical authority: whatever one may believe about the divine authorship of the Bible, throughout history it is very human readers who have been construing the meanings of those texts. Unless the Divine Author also controls the reading of the text, the very medium chosen for the message, that of language with its inherent indeterminacy and ambiguity, undercuts the singularity and directness of the communication. Doctrinal discussions of biblical authority usually try to address this issue by pointing out that the reading of scripture must be done prayerfully

and with the help of the Holy Spirit. The concept of some divine assistance in discernment of meaning is very ancient, witness the *Paraklētos* of the Gospel of John or the “Master Within” of Augustine. However, the problem is not erased by such measures because they do not explain the multiple meanings present throughout the history of interpreting the Bible. Evidently, even with the help of the Holy Spirit, multiple meanings of scripture abound. How is this issue to be adjudicated for the “special hermeneutics” of biblical authority?

Among those for whom the Bible is authoritative or normative, it is important to argue that only one meaning can be the correct one and all of the others must be mistaken.³⁸ But which one is correct? And by what criteria is that correctness to be determined? Historical observation demonstrates that the “correctness” of a reading is generally determined by the leaders of the dominant group or sub-group in any cultural period according to their own current intellectual and religious criteria and all other readings are rejected as wrong.³⁹ However, those criteria themselves change over time. For example, in the twelfth century allegorical readings were deemed to be correct, intended by God, the way the Bible was meant to be read, but by the twentieth century under the dominance of the historical paradigm, allegorical readings are judged as wrong, as instances of the terrible sin of eisegesis. Or, in the nineteenth century slavery was taken to be blessed by biblical mandate, but in the late twentieth century it is currently assigned to those texts to be read only from a “general hermeneutics” perspective.

If it is the case that readers co-create the meanings of the texts they interpret, then claiming biblical authority as the justification for a certain view or belief serves to disguise the role of the reader or community of readers in crafting that viewpoint. As feminists have argued for years, there are no neutral interpretations. All readings are interested; that is, they are shaped by the advocacies and beliefs of readers, but this general rule becomes something much more dangerous in the “special hermeneutics” of authority. In that case, readers construct readings of the Bible according to their *own* perspectives and conventional practices and then endow those readings with transcendent and eternal authority over the lives of others—hiding from others, and sometimes even from themselves, the degree of personal interest shaping their readings.⁴⁰ Thus, the “special hermeneutics” of authority opens the way for individuals or groups to proclaim their own experiences of life, their own particular beliefs, and their own notions of moral and ethical norms to be the will of the Eternal and Unchanging God, whose authoritative word they are proclaiming for all others to obey. Under the “special hermeneutics” of authority, the Bible becomes a powerful weapon in the hands of some to force their will and beliefs on others. The destructive results of such a perversion of scriptural influence can be found spread across the pages of history, as we saw earlier. How might these difficulties in the church’s use of the Bible be avoided? How might the Bible in the church become a blessing on creation rather than a weapon of aggression?

THE BIBLE AS THE INSPIRED WORD OF GOD

Is it possible to so reformulate the function of the Bible in ecclesiastical endeavors as to retain its valuable vision of liberation, justice, peace, and mercy but remove its public role as legitimator in discourses of abusive authority, power, and control? How could the Bible and the communities it validates be reconstituted for justice, love, and respect for difference in our present time and historical context? While the "general hermeneutics" of biblical scholarship offers some advantages and is, indeed, used by most Christians and most ecclesiastical bodies at certain moments, it really does not have a way of respecting the sacredness or the faith attachment many Christians feel in the Bible. This lack may be one of the major reasons that studies of the Bible by scholars often seem irrelevant, or even sometimes offensive, to some Christians. In treating the Bible as they would any other ancient text, scholars, as scholars, can only describe from the outside the spiritual connection many believers experience in reading the text itself. Any reformulation of the function of the Bible must account for this important experience of believers.

My vision for reconstituting the present situation begins with a firm rejection of any doctrine of biblical authority. When the Bible is set in the context of discourses of authority and normativity, its interpretations take on the socially oppressive and destructive characteristics I have been discussing. The "special hermeneutics" of authority is much too destructive and potentially devious a practice of reading to be ethically embraced by any ecclesiastical body, in my view. If the Bible is not to be doctrinally authoritative or normative for Christian life today, what role can it have? I believe it might be understood as primarily *inspirational*, both inspired in its writing and inspiring in its reading, which is after all the way Jesus and the earliest Christians seem to have viewed scripture in the first place. Scripture is able to inspire, literally to "breathe in," the hope, religious joy, and vision of its ancient authors and audiences. It does not dictate what our current views, hopes, or visions should be but instead allows us to witness the successes and failures of those before us in the struggle to be faithful doers of the will of God. Their courage in their particular historical contexts can inspire us to be courageous in our own historical situations. But their social, cultural, and theological limitations need not be adopted in the present world as God's eternal command, as they now often are. Understanding the Bible as the inspirational, rather than authoritative, center of Christian fellowship requires contemporary Christians, much like the earliest Christians, to take full responsibility for their own theological and ethical decisions. Interpretations of the Bible can no longer be used as a warrant or proof-text to disguise the human drives to power and control of its readers. Like Paul and the Corinthians, modern Christians will have to define and argue for their own theological positions in open encounter with those whose theological positions are quite different, without hiding behind the Bible as guarantee that one is right and the other is wrong.

For such debates to occur, one momentous change in contemporary Christian communities must take place: laity must become theologically liter-

ate. I believe the theological and spiritual inertia that haunts many congregations and parishes must end, if Christianity is to have any viable future in the next millennium. Clergy need to become spiritual interpreters and theological educators who are committed to cultivating the theological and spiritual maturity of their parishioners. While there is still a division between a student and a teacher, the purpose of good education is to close that gap by eventually bringing the student to the teacher's level of knowledge; this is far different from the perpetual theological chasm that now generally yawns between pastors and their congregations. What I envision is no less than the democratization of the church. While such a horizontal re-ordering of power relations would not make church life easier, it would make it more vital, more honest, and more capable of responding to the real world of twentieth-century society.

Furthermore, when I look at the Bible for inspiration for living in this real world of remarkable diversity, I find the portrayal of Jesus' vision of the kingdom, particularly as it is presented in the Gospels of Mark and Luke, central to my thinking. Jesus' actions of healing the sick, feeding the poor, eating with the oppressed and socially outcast, defying traditional regulations of purity and piety to help those in pain or in need regardless of their gender or their religious or ethnic affiliation embodied a love of people in all their differences. Such views challenged the social and religious conventions of Jesus' own historical period. They stand as metaphors for a revelation of God's kingdom as the rejection of human traditions of exclusivity and the reconstruction of human creation as it was intended to be: fully heterogeneous yet inclusive, with dignity and respect for everyone.

Because scripture functions as inspiration, not as a transcendent, authoritative model, I am also free to name and reject the manner in which some of these metaphors, taken normatively, have been used to demean those who are ill or blind or paralyzed. Because the gospels often symbolize the kingdom by Jesus' *healings*, illness itself or disability have sometimes been evaluated as signs of God's punishment or as barriers to full membership in Christianity or even to full humanity itself, the very opposite of the inclusivity, dignity, and respect the kingdom inspires. Consequently, even the gospel writers' own metaphors for the radical inclusivity of the kingdom are partial and flawed, as indeed were the attempts of the earliest Christians to embody that revelation. Nevertheless, they did try, and especially in the early Christian mission, the radical potential of Jesus' revelation of the kingdom inspired the free extension of God's promises to include gentiles, the non-Jewish "nations," many of whom had historically been the oppressors of the Jewish people. Although Paul himself was more limited in his vision than some early Christians who conceived of a fully inclusive society without slavery, the oppression of women, or the ownership of children, Paul clearly rejected the views of other Christians, who were only willing to extend the kingdom of God to gentiles who became like themselves by adopting circumcision and Jewish food regulations.

Clearly, for early Christian missionaries like Paul the open incorporation of believers of all races, ethnicities, and religious backgrounds into full and equal partnership in the traditional contract of God to Abraham and the Jewish peo-

ple was an act of outrageous inclusivity. As radical as it was in its own historical milieu, the gentile mission was still only a partial embodiment of the renewal of creation called for by Jesus' revelation of the kingdom, but it can inspire us to further radical incorporations—incorporations that extend equal participation to people of both genders and all nations and races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, classes, physical abilities, and cultural and religious traditions.

This is my vision for reforming Christian communities. But my vision is just that, *my vision*. It is not a prescription or a blueprint, and it is restricted by the historical and social limitations of my own specific perspective. Of course, everybody's vision is just that. The Bible itself is composed of similar visions of many diverse people from different cultures and different historical periods, and our readings of the Bible are our ways of bringing our own visions into conversation with theirs. However, even when we can affirm that the Bible overflows with stories of love and justice, that has not prevented it from being employed by discourses of authority to justify exclusion, persecution, suffering, and even death for those deemed as outsiders to the current "normative" vision, whatever it might be. We must stop teaching and learning this "special hermeneutics" of authority, because while reading the Bible can be a spiritual, imaginative, and inspirational activity, it also must be an *ethical* activity, and those readings we should enact in our lives and our communities, I believe, are those which make of the Bible a blessing, and not a curse, on God's good creation.

NOTES

1. Bultmann, "Das Problem der Hermeneutik," *Glauben und Verstehen* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1961) II: 231-32.

2. Actually, many ancient authors believed that the texts they wrote were inspired by divine guidance. Hesiod, for example, in his *Theogony*, begins by praising the Muses, through whose inspiration he is writing his work on the gods. This rather common claim for divine inspiration in ancient texts is usually ignored in claiming special status for the inspiration of the Bible.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 233-35.

4. These three possible forms of textual authority I am suggesting bear a very rough correspondence to the three forms of social authority posited by Max Weber: charismatic (narrative/rhetorical), traditional (formational), and rational (doctrinal). For a discussion of Weber's views on authority, see S. Lukes, "Power and Authority," in *A History of Sociological Analysis*, ed. T. Bottomore and R. Nisbet (New York: Basic Books, 1978) pp. 663-65. See Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) for another take on the issue of biblical authority. Although Schneiders retains the term "authority" for the role of the Bible, I believe that in her view the type of "authority" scripture should have is more "formational" than "doctrinal."

5. See, e.g., his *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980) and *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983); see also, L. William Countryman, *Biblical Authority Or Biblical Tyranny? Scripture and the Christian Pilgrimage* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981); Donald K. McKim, ed., *The Authoritative Word: Essays on the Nature of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1983); and James D.G. Dunn, *The Living Word* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

6. Barr, *Holy Scripture*, pp. 12-19. As Barr notes, “The authority attached to the Old Testament within the New did not mean that New Testament Christianity took pre-existing scripture as its dominant and controlling ideological base. . . . The undoubted authority of the Old Testament as Word of God does not alter the fact that for the New Testament it is no longer the unique starting point: its positions may be criticized, may be modified, and it is no longer an absolute. Its authority is relative to the supreme authority of Jesus Christ” (pp. 18-19).

7. Dunn, *The Living Word*, p. 127.

8. See the discussion of the canon in Barr, *Holy Scripture*, pp. 23-28.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 39. It is worth remembering that these doctrines were being proposed during the same period when the reason-based discourses of modern science and modern historiography were becoming influential, both of which, in the minds of many church leaders, threatened the foundations of certain respected church dogmas. Some of these dogmas could be shored up by insisting on the authority of every element—even minimal elements—of scripture.

10. E.g., although their aim was to correct church abuses and give individual Christians greater freedom in determining their own practice of religion, by making the authority of the Bible supreme over all other traditions, the Protestant Reformers exercised one of the greatest exclusions in Christian history which resulted in the division of Western Christianity. Moreover, the tendency to use biblical interpretations to create boundaries between “us” and “them” continues in the proliferation of Protestant denominations. Within present ecclesiastical organizations, biblical warrants may be claimed to exclude women from ordination or positions of power in the church structures, to exclude homosexuals from ordination, to forbid divorce or re-marriage, etc.

11. E.g., the prohibition movement earlier in this century, especially in the form of the Woman’s Christian Temperance League, posited a biblical mandate for prohibiting the use of alcohol; anti-abortionists cite the commandment against killing as legitimating their fight for the unborn; etc. This use of biblical authority to authorize national political agenda makes the issue of the appeal to the authority of the Bible one of concern to all citizens and not just Christians or Protestant Christians.

12. E.g., historically problematic claims for creationism and the repudiation of evolutionary theory in favor of the literal existence of the Garden of Eden or the Great Flood of Noah all stem from attribution of authority to the Bible. Again, especially at the state level, these claims are often politically mounted to affect the curricula of public school systems or the selection of textbooks.

13. Theological formulations concerning the authority of the Bible have generally been attempts to understand the place of the Bible in the context of revelation, faith, and the workings of the Holy Spirit, and they can be found in the Christian tradition as far back as Origen and Augustine. For example, the Westminster Confession of Faith, drawn up in the seventeenth century and still the basis of many evangelical Christians’ doctrine of biblical authority, argued that only through the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of each person could that person come to understand the Bible as the Word of God, and it was a Word that contained all things necessary to human salvation and faith. For a brief discussion of various understandings of the place of the Bible in Christian tradition, see J.B. Rogers, “The Church Doctrine of Biblical Authority,” in *The Authoritative Word: Essays on the Nature of Scripture*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 197-224. See also, David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

14. James Brewer Stewart, “Abolitionists, the Bible, and the Challenge of Slavery,” in E. Sandeen, ed., *The Bible and Social Reform* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), pp. 38-39.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

16. Whether the practice of cultic prostitution was an actual practice of religions surrounding Israel or instead an Israelite polemic against its enemies has become a major point of debate surrounding these verses; see, e.g., Ken Stone, "The Hermeneutics of Abomination: On Gay Men, Canaanites, and Biblical Interpretation" *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 27 (Summer 1997): 36-41.

17. See the extensive lexicographical study of the Greek in John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 335-353, and more recently the thorough discussion in Dale Martin, "Arsenokoitês and Malakos: Meanings and Consequences," in *Biblical Ethics & Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*, ed. Robert L. Brawley (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996) pp. 117-136.

18. For other possible meanings, see, e.g., James Miller, "The Practices of Romans 1:26: Homosexual or Heterosexual?" *Novum Testamentum* 37 (1995): 1-11.

19. For the ancients, sexuality was defined as dominance and submission; thus only relations between socially dominant individuals, mostly free adult males, and socially submissive individuals, which could be either women or slaves or youth, were considered "natural." For a full discussion of the construction of sexuality in antiquity as well as through history, see the fine study by Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). For a thorough analysis of the importance of Paul's cultural and social world for his views on women and homoeroticism, see Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), especially pp. 215-302.

20. Comment made during the Cole Lectures, Vanderbilt University Divinity School, February 8-9, 1994.

21. I would argue that this is true even of fundamentalist groups whose view of biblical authority has been heightened mightily into a claim for biblical "inerrancy." Many fundamentalist leaders are able to select which rules are relevant to today and which are not through the use of "dispensationalism," a view that divides history into a set number of dispensations. Interestingly—and arguably heretically—the present dispensation in which we now live began *after* the death of Jesus and so only the material in the Bible referring to "our dispensation" is actually relevant to today's world, making the words of Jesus in the gospels of much *less* concern than the letters of Paul or the Pastoral Epistles. For more information on fundamentalists' techniques of reading the Bible, see, e.g., Kathleen Boone, *For the Bible Tells Them So: The Discourse of Protestant Fundamentalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989) and James Barr, *Fundamentalism*, 2d ed. (London: SCM Press, 1981).

22. See, e.g., Chapter I, Section iv of the Westminster Confession, which asserts that God is the sole Author of all of scripture.

23. This need for selective blindness is not a new problem. Origen, in calling for allegorical interpretation of scripture, argued that the literal meaning of biblical passages could not be supported in those many cases in which the passage was "unworthy of God."

24. For example, by substituting in one's reading the amount of an average contemporary day's wage for the text's use of "denarius."

25. See the careful delineation of this argument in Brooten, *Love Between Women*, pp. 215-266.

26. See Brooten's telling critique of the work of Richard Hays, who wants to hold onto Paul's rejection of homoeroticism as normative while ignoring the denigration of women on which it is based. *Ibid.*, p. 245.

27. I learned this lesson very early in life. When I was a pre-teen, a friend of mine from church told me that the Bible proved women could smoke. When I expressed disbelief that the Bible had anything to say about smoking, my friend pointed to Genesis 24:64,

which in the King James Version we were using, said, speaking of Rebekah, "she alighted the camel."

28. Some representative theorists would be, e.g., Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981); Frank Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); and Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1982). For a discussion of the variety of reader-response criticisms, see Susan Suleiman and I. Crosman, eds., *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Jane Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); and Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

29. *Truth and Method*, pp. 340-341. "Horizon," a term that Gadamer takes from Husserl, refers to that "... which constitutes the unity of the flow of experience ..." (p. 217).

30. In the most common genre in the New Testament, the letter, this cumulative effect is often now studied in terms of ancient rhetoric, the conventional forms of arrangement and argumentation taught and practiced throughout the Greco-Roman period.

31. It is especially revealing to notice how the same text placed in a different string takes on a very different function. For example, when the creation story in Genesis 2-3 is associated with a string of quotations on the second-class status of women, the Genesis material is read to show that women come second in creation and are only valued as helpers to men. When, on the other hand, the same story is put into the homosexuality string of Romans 1:26 and Leviticus 18-20, the text becomes a proof of the importance of the creation of two different sexes who are intended to become one. In the latter case, the inferiority of women is elided or denied in the oneness that only two different sexes can achieve. The context provided by the other quotations in the string makes all the difference in how the passage projects the supposed normal status of women: are they inferior to men or are they one with men?

32. Barr, *Holy Scripture*, p. 3.

33. The hermeneutical practices of biblical inerrantists give an extreme twist to ancient harmonization. Since the Bible is believed to be inerrant historically as well as in every other way, events that are told in several even slightly different versions are proclaimed to have happened more than once historically. For instance, since the trial of Jesus before Pilate is related in three rather different accounts, those of Mark/Matthew, Luke, and John, some inerrantists claim that Jesus was actually, historically tried three times by the Romans. Although this rather bizarre practice does explain the differences between the accounts, it still makes the individual gospel writers out to be poor or very misleading authors, since each one tells of only *one* trial before Pilate, not the "historical" *three*.

34. Stuart Hall, "Encoding, decoding," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (London and New York: Routledge, 1993): 91-92.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

36. J. A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1984) p. 7.

37. See, e.g., Robert Grant and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984). For a fascinating recent popular compendium of the variety of readings, often conflicting readings, found in appeals to biblical authority, see Jim Hill and Rand Cheadle, *The Bible Tells Me So: Uses and Abuses of Holy Scripture* (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1996).

38. This view has infected biblical scholarship in the past as well, probably arising

from its early formation in historical positivism; see the discussion in Mary A. Tolbert, "When Resistance Becomes Repression: Mark 13:9-27 and the Poetics of Location," in Fernando Segovia and Mary A. Tolbert, eds., *Reading from This Place Volume 2: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) pp. 339-46.

39. See Hayden White's discussion of the importance of noting who has the authority in any situation to determine, not only the meaning of a text, but even what questions are proper to put to a text, in "Conventional Conflicts," *The New Literary History* 13 (1981): 145-60.

40. A excellent example of this problem occurred recently in a class of mine. A male African-American pastor turned in a paper on the household code in Colossians 3:18-4:6 in which he argued that the command to slaves to obey their masters was part of the ancient history of the text and in no way applicable to the present. However, he went on to argue that the command to wives to obey their husbands was still an authoritative norm for today because it was supported in the creation story in Genesis 2-3 where women are created to be the helper of their husbands. Thus, this student ignored the possible strings of texts that have been used to support the God-giveness of slavery but constructed a string that would show the continued applicability of the dictate about the subordination of women. In talking with the student, it became clear to me that he was essentially oblivious to the fact that his interpretation served to negate a biblical mandate that would (and has) hurt him but to preserve a mandate in the same text that privileged him above women. The degree to which his own personal interests shaped his reading of which portion of scripture was authoritative and which was not was obvious to everyone else in the class but not to him—nor, one fears, his congregation.