

Hermeneutical Issues Regarding Women's Roles

By Mark E Moore, PhD

- 1. Locus of meaning** – From where does the reader draw meaning? From the author (who is, by the way, dead); from the text (which is open to multiple interpretations); or from the reader (who is culturally determined to some extent)? This third area is winning the day, particularly in Feminist camps who argue that language is always socially constructed and interpreted. After all, this is the way we even listen to love songs on the radio – we adopt them as our own story.
- 2. Temporal vs. Universal** – How much of the text is applicable beyond the original audience. There are principles in regard to this but no hard and fast rules. Furthermore, this is an argument we are destined to lose because no matter whom the exegete is there will always be inconsistencies in how this is applied. Bottom line: if you allow exceptions, what's to keep the feminist from doing so as well?
- 3. There are multiple feminist hermeneutics** – D. M. Scholer, "Feminist Hermeneutics and Evangelical Biblical Interpretation," *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 15/4 (1991) 305-320, lists a number. Some of the more significant ones are (1) **Evangelicals** who argue that the texts have been misunderstood or misrepresented. (2) **Wicca** which rejects the Bible altogether, and, in fact, demeans biblical values as opposed to women. They celebrate goddess worship as exalting to women. (3) **Remnant and Retrieval** looks for stories of women that would show their positive contributions through Biblical history. The Catholic view of Mary would be a classic example. (4) **Tales of Terror** is a method by which horrible bible stories (e.g. Eze 16; Judges 11; 19) are recounted to show how poorly women have been treated in the past as a warning not to do it in the future. Under this heading one could look at a new hermeneutical method called *pornoprophetics* in which all the grotesque body imagery is collected (e.g. Eze 16:17) to show how badly women have been abused and mistreated (cf. Fiona Black, "Beauty or the Beast? The Grotesque Body in the Song of Songs," *Biblical Interpretation* 8/3 [2000] 302-323). There is usually a good bit of rejection of the Scriptures in this camp. (5) **Liberation** is a means by which one looks back to the Bible not for doctrine but for a platform. We find texts that remind us of our situation and use them to support, comfort and deconstruct.
- 4. The use of language as a tool for oppression.** This is something that we really will need to be sensitive to. Language is a tool for creation of culture. We who believe in the power of *logos* should be the first to recognize this. We should also admit how influential Biblical metaphors are *even when used incorrectly*. If we misinterpret the Bible we will use its authority to harm rather than heal.
- 5. What we bring to the text will partially determine what we get out of the text.** Our presuppositions do color our interpretations. For example, we talk about women's roles as domestic servants. In Biblical times, however, women were very much involved in the family's economy. The model woman of Proverbs 31 even

“worked outside the home.” The image of the housewife in the 50’s is not equivalent to the Biblical portrait of the ideal woman. Our shift from an agrarian society to an industrialized society had more to do with our view of women’s roles than did exegesis.

6. **Narrative Exegesis.** We almost invariably get our rules for women from the Epistles rather than the narrative portions of gospels and Acts. This is unfortunate since this eliminates more than 50% of the N.T. from the discussion, not to mention the vast historical portions of the O.T. We mention in passing that women did some notable things but we really don’t know what to do with that. We are **not** simply saying, “Hey, if you can find an example of a woman doing it then it’s ok for you.” Rather, we are suggesting that patterns emerge that can be readily discerned and used for theological development. W. M. Swartley, “The Role of Women in Mark’s Gospel: A Narrative Analysis,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 27/1 (1997) 16-22, offers an extremely helpful model along this line. He lines up all the disciples in Mark who follow Jesus. He finds seven that get a positive endorsement. Of these, three are men (the leper, 1:40-45; Jairus, 5:21-24, 35-43; and Bartimaeus, 10:46-52), yet all have some sort of question mark loom over their discipleship, albeit a small question mark. That leaves four disciples who are painted in purely positive light, all of which are women (the woman with a hemorrhage, 5:24b-34; the Syro-Phoenician woman, 7:34-30; widow with two mites, 12:41-44; and Mary, Martha’s sister who anointed Jesus, 14:3-9). Some might say, “Well, Mark is not making a theological statement, he’s merely recording historical events.” Even if it could be substantiated that Mark means nothing theological by these stories (which is highly suspect), a raw historical telling would be even more powerful since it would betray the fact that there are more positive examples of women disciples than men and that Jesus accepted them openly against the mores of his day. This is not an argument for the feminist position, but for a hermeneutical method that takes into account the preponderance of narrative material in the Bible.