

LIBERATION AND FEMINIST BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS  
AND THE RENEWAL OF THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH  
IN THE WESLEYAN TRADITION

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On the occasion of the beginning of Methodism's third century in the United States, the 1984 General Conference established "The Commission on the Mission of the United Methodist Church" to identify "Christ's call for our third century," and to present to the 1988 General Conference "a realistic proposal for relevant mission in the light of the distinctive capacities and limitations of the United Methodist Church."<sup>1</sup> Because of their origins in a missionary movement, a commitment to "mission" has always characterized churches in the Wesleyan tradition. Even after the Wesleyan missionary movement became a church following the American Revolution, this commitment remained strong and central to the identity of the new church. Its understanding of itself as belonging to a missionary movement led the Methodist Church to play an important role in the spread of Christianity in the American frontier, the abolition of slavery, and the foreign and home missionary movements. This commitment also energized the establishment of institutions of higher education and health care facilities funded and administered by the Methodist Church and gave birth to the Sunday School movement as well as to the Methodist Federation of Social Action. It is hard to find a more creative and productive impulse, and one that is so central to the identity of the Church in the Wesleyan tradition, than this commitment to "mission." The Methodist Church in the United States would seem to have remained faithful to the missional purpose for which it had been organized in 1784: "to reform the Nation and to spread Scriptural Holiness throughout the Land."

And yet, this story of the mission of the Church in the Wesleyan tradition would not be true if failures to remain faithful to this purpose were not also told. For the period of the greatest missionary activity of the Methodist Church in the United States also saw the genocide of native Americans, the division of the Church over the abolition movement, and, by the end of the nineteenth century, the dissolution of its original twofold missional purpose. Societies were formed within the Church to carry out its missional purposes, which accelerated the process of diffusing the identity of the Church in the Wesleyan tradition (which had by now divided into several churches) by ordering its structure around a multiplicity of purposes. And "holiness" movements had withdrawn from the

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<sup>1</sup>This paper is written from the perspective of the experience of the United Methodist Church in the United States as one embodiment of "the Church in the Wesleyan tradition."

Gentiles.<sup>4</sup>

The general mission of the Church can also be derived from statements in the letters that identify the work to which God had called Paul or the divine purpose of the Church. Again, these will reflect the historical situations of specific churches in particular places and times. In his earliest letter, Paul implies that his mission among Gentiles was to convert them from the worship of idols to a life of service to the "living and true God," that they might await the coming of the risen Jesus to deliver them from "the wrath to come" (1 Thess 1:9-10).<sup>5</sup> When Paul interprets this mission in the context of opposition to it by Jewish Christians, he emphasizes that his task was to bring about the "obedience of faith" among all the nations (Rom 1:5), by which he means that he does so without abolishing "the law"--he claims, on the contrary, that in so doing he upholds it (3:31). In other words, Paul conceived his mission among the Gentiles to be one of bringing to fulfillment God's ancient promise to "justify" the Gentiles through "faith."<sup>6</sup> This understanding of the Gentile mission is expressed in more cosmological terms in Eph 3:7-13, which reflects the situation of a later generation of Pauline Christianity. At a time when social patterns in Christian communities of faith were in tension with the dominant social pattern, the author of 1 Pet 2:18-3:7 exhorts the church to conform to patriarchal patterns of hierarchy, and thereby to proclaim the "excellent deeds" of the one who "called" them out of "darkness" into Christ's "marvelous light" (1 Pet 2:9).

The mission of the Church, however, demands a concreteness that cannot be derived simply from scripture. For this concreteness must be peculiar to specific and changing circumstances, as we can already see in the New Testament passages mentioned above. As in biblical times, so now the concrete mission of the Church can be discovered only when the gospel and knowledge of the actual world are each interpreted

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<sup>4</sup>In the Synoptic Gospels, compare Matt 10:6 and 28:19; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8; and the addition to the ending of Mark in 16:15. Mark 7:24-30 (par. Matt 15:21-28) seems to have been composed at the end of this development from Jesus to the early church. See also the Pauline letters, especially Paul's emphasis on "to the Jew first, then also to the Gentiles" (Rom 1:16 and 2:9), a theme that runs throughout Romans and lies behind Galatians.

<sup>5</sup>See Gal 4:8-10; also see Gal 1:4, which summarizes the gospel which God had called Paul to preach among Gentiles (1:15-16) and which Paul charges the Christians in Galatia were deserting (1:6-9).

<sup>6</sup>See Galatians, especially 3:6-14. The debates about the interpretation of the dik- and pist- word groups and about "the law" in Pauline theology exceed the scope of this paper.

interpretation of the "primacy" of scripture that reduces tradition, experience, and reason to mere tools of the interpretation of scripture and, thereby, restricts "our theological task" to biblical hermeneutics.<sup>9</sup> The issue is not the "primacy" of scripture for theology in the Wesleyan tradition. Neither is it the role of tradition, experience, and reason in the interpretation of scripture. Rather, it is whether all members of the quadrilateral--and not just scripture--have "authority in their own right."<sup>7</sup>

In the revised statement of "Our Theological Task," they do not. The following is a summary of its view of the quadrilateral:

Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith stands revealed in Scripture, illuminated by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason. [13, emphasis added]

*from original*

A comparison of the verbs shows that only scripture is accorded authority in its own right, and that the other three serve only as tools of biblical hermeneutics.<sup>10</sup>

That they have no authority in their own right is made even clearer in the explanations that follow:

. . . tradition also provides both a source and a measure of authentic Christian witness, though its validity

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especially 13-14. Hereafter, page references will be given with quotations from this draft.

<sup>9</sup>Compare John B. Cobb, Jr.'s critique of the proposed revision ("I Say, 'Keep the Quadrilateral!'", Circuit Rider 11/5 [May 1987], 4-6). For a defence of the revised text, see Kenneth C. Kinghorn, "I Say, 'The Bible Is the Decisive Source of Authority!'", in the same journal (6-7).

<sup>7</sup>See Cobb, Circuit Rider 11 (1987), 8. In his response to Cobb, who was a member of the Committee that wrote the doctrinal statements in the current Discipline, Kinghorn, a member of the Committee drafting the revision, fails to address the issue that Cobb raises (8).

<sup>10</sup>Compare the present statement in the Discipline (page references in parentheses are to the 1984 edition published by the UM Publishing House, Nashville): "These four norms for doctrinal formulations are not simply parallel and none can be subsumed by any other" (81, emphasis added). Although it affirms the "primacy" of scripture, it recognizes that "theological reflection may find its point of departure in tradition, 'experience,' or rational analysis. What matters most is that all four guidelines be brought to bear upon every doctrinal consideration" (81).

that one-sidedly affirms "the primacy of scripture," the advice that "new awareness of such experiences can inform our appropriation of scriptural truths" may not lead the Church to make a commitment to struggle with these people for liberation from their suffering.

What is needed is a biblical hermeneutic not of consent but of suspicion. For, if we consider the command to be "submissive" in the patriarchal "household codes" in the New Testament,<sup>12</sup> we can see that the issue here is not the misreading or misuse of biblical texts, but precisely uses based on their correct reading. That is why a theological method that subordinates experience to scripture by interpreting the former "in the light of scriptural norms" without also affirming the obligation to test the truth of "scriptural norms" in the light of experience lends support, intentionally or not, to those who appeal to "the primacy of scripture" in their effort to maintain patriarchal patterns of social order.<sup>13</sup>

*whose, authentic experience  
(those in power)*

The second concrete case concerns reason as directly as experience. According to the proposed revision of the statement of the role of reason in the quadrilateral, reason is "not itself a source of theology," but a "necessary tool":

*thus offering us  
the Bible offers, however,*

By reason we read and interpret Scripture. By reason we determine whether our Christian witness is clear. By reason we organize the understandings which compose our witness and render them internally coherent. [14]

These statements affirm that theological discourse in the Wesleyan tradition will follow the public canons of reason. In the continuation of this description of the role of reason, however, the scope of these canons is restricted, and the public discourse to which they finally belong is limited to the discourse of scripture. The draft states that "by reason we relate our witness to the full range of human knowledge and experience" (14, emphasis added). But, in the context of a document which also states that "by reason we test the congruence of our witness to the biblical testimony and to the traditions which mediate that testimony to us" (14, emphasis added) without acknowledging the possibility, let alone affirming the need, of testing "the congruence of our witness," and that of scripture, to reason and experience, our

*Again, what is the  
"canon" of reason?*

<sup>12</sup>See Col 3:18-4:1; Eph 5:22-6:9; 1 Tim 2:11-15; 5:3-8; 6:1-2; Tit 2:2-10; 3:1-2; and 1 Pet 2:18-3:7.

<sup>13</sup>For a more complete development of this thesis, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation (Boston: Beacon, 1984), where one can find the most recent literature on the "household codes."

theologians have so convinced systematic, even some philosophical, theologians that the doctrine of divine omnipotence is "biblical" that theologians influenced by the process philosophies of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne have often set their more relational God, whose power is limited by the power finite beings necessarily have, over-against the ("biblical") God, whose power is (thought to be) limited by God's will alone (although at times it is admitted that God's power is also limited by reason). The element of explicit as well as implicit contingency in biblical narratives, even apocalyptic narratives, and in the subjunctive and imperative moods and in the use of the conditional clause in the Bible; the relational character of the Word as the central biblical metaphor of God and of divine power; and the relational character of the passion or suffering of God depicted in the peculiarly Christian proclamation of the cross as God's decisive, redemptive act--all these have not overturned the dominant impression that omnipotence is a "biblical" doctrine and that it is essential to "the biblical" view of God.

This view of God as absolute and nonrelational influenced the development of an understanding of the human person which contributed to the processes that have led to the present ecological crisis. Although there is no biblical warrant for human beings claiming omnipotent power, whether over other human beings or over the nonhuman world, the view of divine omnipotence and its canonization as a doctrine of the Bible was joined with the (largely Aristotelian) philosophical doctrine that ideal or perfect power is absolute, rather than relational, and that the ideal or perfect individual, therefore, was also absolute, rather than relational. Much in the Bible can be claimed to be congruent with this view. Elements in the Bible that could challenge it have been overlooked, ignored, or relativized. The Bible, therefore, has not challenged, but has lent support to, forces in the history of Western civilization that have led to the increasing isolation of individual parts of the world from the whole to which they are organically related, and to the increasing individualization of human existence in particular. That process has made possible technological achievements and the industrialization of the world that have both raised the quality of human life and threatened life itself.

There is little in the Bible to mitigate this worldview. What there is has been overlooked by most biblical theologians. Biblical elements of an alternative, more balanced and organic worldview, are not likely to be highlighted, or even noticed, by a biblical hermeneutic in which a one-sided affirmation of "the primacy of scripture" denies the value of reason and experience as theological norms in their own right, and affirms their value only as tools of biblical hermeneutics.

When we turn to the Bible, on the other hand, from the perspective of a philosophy that views the world as an indivisible, organic whole, in which each individual part has

*cf. Pannenberg  
not the view is  
wrongly grounded  
in the Absolute &  
not in biblical God*

*important  
process contribution*

*not it can only  
challenge if its  
authority is  
recognized*

*absolute?  
thought of  
joint was a  
relational  
orientation*

every hermeneutic will begin with a "preunderstanding" that is just such a set of values, i.e., an "ideology."<sup>17</sup>

Forms of the Church's mission informed by biblical hermeneutics rooted in Reformation traditions have tended to concentrate one-sidedly on the proclamation of the individual believer's freedom from bondage to the power of sin in the world and from a burden of guilt before God. This tradition of biblical hermeneutics tends to lend support to visions of the mission of the Church that fail to address the embodiment of sin in social structures by participating in political action. Its "ideology," therefore, tends to maintain the existing social, political, and economic structures.

*X*  
*started. So*  
*the impact from*  
*experience needs*  
*be at the point*  
*of forming a hermeneutic, not at the point of authority.*

A different "ideology" is found in liberation and feminist biblical hermeneutics. Both forms of biblical hermeneutics--Reformation and liberation/feminist<sup>18</sup>--address the concrete situation of the Church in the world today. Both reflect critically on how they go about their task. But liberation and feminist biblical hermeneutics claim that "a theological model of biblical interpretation" is to be evaluated both according to the scientific norm of adequacy to "the historical-critical methods of contemporary interpretation" and according to the political norm of appropriateness to "the struggle of the oppressed for liberation."<sup>19</sup> The former norm appeals to "reason." The latter, which appeals to "experience," presupposes or implies that the missional purpose of the Church is to be engaged with the oppressed in their struggle for liberation, which must include participation in taking political action to change social, political, and economic structures.

How this missional purpose is to be defined, however, differs widely depending on one's "ideology." European political biblical hermeneutics have contributed to our understanding of the biblical promise of political liberation, but they have not led to the degree of direct participation in

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<sup>17</sup>See Juan Luis Segundo, The Liberation of Theology (John Drury, trans.; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976), chapters 1 and 4. Compare Schüssler Fiorenza's response to criticisms of the "advocacy stance" of liberation and feminist biblical hermeneutics (in Bread Not Stone).

<sup>18</sup>The approaches of liberation and feminist theologians to biblical hermeneutics are not the same. The plural form of the word "hermeneutics" must be taken seriously, not only to distinguish liberation and feminist approaches, but also to distinguish differences within each. The point here, however, is merely to identify elements common to several approaches to biblical hermeneutics.

<sup>19</sup>See Schüssler Fiorenza, Bread Not Stone, 49. Compare Segundo, The Liberation of Theology, chapters 1 and 4.