

## CAN USE OF PROPER HERMENEUTICAL METHODS TRANSCEND GENDER BIAS IN INTERPRETATIONS?

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Christians can transcend interpretive differences among themselves regardless of gender or culture. With proper hermeneutic skills we discover the meaning of Biblical passages and transcend gender bias in interpretation. There are two reasons why the Christian can transcend bias. The first reason consists of the simple argument that either knowledge is possible or no knowledge is possible. Consequently, if bias cannot be overcome, then no knowledge or truth is possible outside of two separate biased experiences. Secondly, Biblical revelation supports the view that women and men and people of different ethnic backgrounds can access, understand, and apply Biblical truth.<sup>1</sup> Since this is the case, bias can be overcome. The question then becomes, “How?”<sup>2</sup>

Bias is commonly defined as “a mental leaning or inclination: partiality; prejudice; bent.”<sup>3</sup> No doubt gender and cultural biases exist. Biases attributed to gender or culture may arise based upon previous individual experience or assumptions.<sup>4</sup> Women and men share many common life experiences,

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<sup>1</sup> The Bible proposes a real world that is intelligible to humanity. Both men and women understand God’s revelation (Psalm 119). The human ability to apprehend knowledge is assumed by the Scriptural authors. In the Epistle to the Romans, Paul writes to “all who are in Rome” (Rom 1:7). Further, the existence of many commands, spoken to all Christians especially throughout the Epistles, speaks to the expectation that truth in Scripture is equally accessible to all regardless of gender, social status or race. For a good grounding in how the Bible teaches truth as correspondence to reality and revelation as God’s intention to communicate with humanity by providing understandable knowledge of Himself, see Chapter 14, “Revelation and Truth,” in William J. Larkin, Jr., *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988) 233–241.

<sup>2</sup> Though this essay addresses gender bias in particular, the tools included, when used, help eliminate other types of bias as well. Of course, since all human beings are sinners, the potential for bias and theological error abounds in both sexes. This essay does not intend to promote a particular position, whether complementarian or egalitarian as found within either “The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood” or “Christians for Biblical Equality.” Instead, all readers are challenged to consider how an objective stance on the interpretation of Biblical revelation and truth applies to various views on gender roles in church and society, so that investigation of personal biases, cultural assumptions, and stereotypes may ensue, regardless of one’s theological position.

<sup>3</sup> *Webster’s New World Dictionary* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982) “bias.”

<sup>4</sup> Sometimes we experience a sequence of individuals who seem to corroborate societal stereotypes. We then project our disappointments and biases onto the gender as a whole.

such as working for a living, the need for intimacy and friendship, marriage or raising children, but they both may have differing cultural experiences or expectations related to how roles are defined, expressed, and experienced in the world and between each other. These experiences can be further confused by misplaced assumptions or biases about the opposite sex. Stereotypes that arise from a misunderstanding of Scripture further complicate male/female relationships.<sup>5</sup>

The term “gender bias” in interpretation implies that Biblical truth is not fully accessible to men or women based upon supposed idiosyncrasies of either sex. These idiosyncrasies may be considered cultural, biological, emotionally based or even willful in nature.

The following illustrations provoke difficult questions, and they point out the need to both understand and overcome gender bias in Biblical interpretation.

One common view suggests that man, by his very nature, is more prepared and competent than woman to judge religious and Biblical matters. James B. Hurley makes the statement:

The man, upon whom lay responsibility for leadership in the home and in religious matters, was prepared by God to discern the serpent’s lies. The woman was not appointed religious leader and was not prepared to discern them. She was taken in.<sup>6</sup>

If Biblical interpretation is the specific realm of the man, then Biblical truth is not totally accessible to women except through men’s teaching or headship. This argument is self-defeating. If all men are more spiritually or intellectually prepared than women, based on Adam’s example and 1 Tim 2:15, how can women understand men’s guidance unless they can tell the difference between truth and lie? No one is always correct and accurate in Biblical interpretation. Perhaps there is an answer yet to come, explicating women’s ability to recognize truth in Scripture. Yet here we certainly have a view that women are less endowed with theological potential than men. Women, it seems, are at either a spiritual or intellectual disadvantage when interpreting God’s words. So are women really at a disadvantage when it comes to knowing, apprehending or applying the truth of Scripture? If so, should we encourage women to learn interpretive techniques? If they do not learn interpretation skills, are they not at even more of a disadvantage with a man, or women, teaching heresy?

<sup>5</sup> Some may view women exclusively as mothers, nurturers or wives rather than as individuals with more general gifts to be shared with society. Sometimes men are unfairly cast as merely providers without emotional needs. Alternatively, some believe women and men are androgynous, attempting to erase any distinctions among the sexes. The above stereotypes can result from interpretations of complex Biblical passages that are either too literal or too loose, or they may reflect current dysfunctions in our society.

<sup>6</sup> Hurley’s paraphrase of 1 Tim 2:14 in light of Genesis 3 states, “Christian worship involves re-establishing the creational pattern with men faithfully teaching God’s truth and women receptively listening” (*Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981] 216).

Wherever Hurley may stand on women's ability to know, apprehend, and apply truth, this position brings up one final question which is not within the scope of this essay to resolve: Is it possible that 1 Tim 2:9–15 teaches that women are, in some way, irretrievably biased so that they are more easily deceived than men in Scriptural matters? And a counterpoint to this query: How far can we push interpretation of this one verse in light of other Scripture that might suggest such deception may be overcome in Christ?

Berkeley and Alvera Mickelsen suggest many translations contain male bias.<sup>7</sup> Although one may not accept all their conclusions, it is surely true that some Biblical passages, including 1 Tim 2:12–15, contain notorious difficulties that may leave room for cultural bias in interpretation.<sup>8</sup> Many of these passages deal with women's role in the church and home.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, liberation feminist theological models promote a "hermeneutic of suspicion." These feminists suggest the Bible includes patriarchal material that must be sought out and eliminated before Biblical passages may be applied to women.<sup>10</sup> Men who authored Scripture or interpret Scripture may be considered intentionally or unintentionally biased based on their social conditioning. Undoubtedly social conditioning can play a part in bias. But this position holds that at least some of the Biblical authors were not inspired by God and unable to overcome their own male bias. So the questions are raised: What part does social conditioning play in gender bias? Are men damaged by bias? Are men irrevocably damaged? Or are these women perhaps demonstrating their own bias against men by some of these feminist definitions?

Finally, some feminists such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza may import biased secular definitions and ideologies into

<sup>7</sup> Berkeley and Alvera Mickelsen, "Does Male Dominance Tarnish Our Translations?" in *Women and Men in Ministry* (ed. Roberta Hestenes; Pasadena: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1985) 91–95.

<sup>8</sup> Some of the difficulties of 1 Tim 2:9–15 include: (1) What does the word *authenteo* or "authority" mean? (2) Should the creation illustration be interpreted as a universal or situational? (3) What does verse 15 mean and how does it relate to the previous material? Many fine exegetes cite the difficulties of interpreting this passage. For examples, see W. Klein, C. Blomberg, and R. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993) 409; Walter Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 119–120; Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible For all its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 67–69. Because there is so much material on the interpretation of 1 Tim 2:9–15, a full bibliography does not appear here. The sources quoted above affirm genuine difficulties that must be overcome in a proper interpretation of 1 Tim 2:9–15. There is a multitude of work on the subject. For overviews of the positions, see works by the above authors as well as bibliographies published by the "Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood" and "Christians for Biblical Equality."

<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 11, 1 Tim 2:9–15, 1 Pet 3:1–7, etc.

<sup>10</sup> "However, even in considering the whole Bible, we must remember that the book was primarily written by men in patriarchal cultures; that the canon was defined by men, who left out many books now known to us to be more favorable to women; that Scripture has been interpreted for two thousand years by male exegetes and theologians in support of male supremacy. Even reference books betray male bias. Thus as feminist Bible scholar Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza suggests, a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' is always in order." L. Scanzoni and N. Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986) 26–27.

Biblical interpretation. Biblical material may be combined with Gnostic sources resulting in a redefinition of basic Christian terminology.<sup>11</sup> In this case even the word “Christian” is redefined to include “marginal” and “heretical” views that have existed at the edges of orthodox tradition throughout history.<sup>12</sup> These interpreters of Scripture are relativists redefining Christianity with a goal of a women-centered theology. The following questions arise here: Is it ever appropriate to promote an agenda when interpreting Scripture? And, how seriously do we take our responsibility to evaluate our basic assumptions or even our systematic theologies if the text does not fit neatly into our pre-arranged categories?

The questions provoked by the previous interpretive frameworks correspond to real difficulties encountered by men and women in their quest to know, understand, and love God through seeking an objective knowledge that results in love of Christ and obedience to his Word.

The above overview also directs us toward controversies posed by religious and secular relativists on the nature of truth: What does it mean when one says men and women have different perspectives? Are these differing perspectives differing truths, or differing applications of universal time-bound principles? As Christians we must take care to not unconsciously fall into a dual-truth theory in our teaching on male/female perspectives.<sup>13</sup>

At times both women and men may discount each other as biased because of their gender. What lies at the root of bias? Granting some bias does exist for everyone, are we destined to live in it? Are men and women so completely different that truth is only a matter of gender perspective and context? Many postmoderns would have us think so. But the Christian concept of truth argues a different scenario. Truth intersects with reality, the truth of Biblical revelation, and the teaching of the Holy Spirit. So we must all seek to engage the question of truth and gender bias in interpretation. Investigating interpretive methods that reduce bias ultimately produces healthy relationships and healthy churches. Furthermore, the only way to truly fight bias is to begin at the beginning with an investigation of our ultimate assumptions and means for discovering the truth in interpretation.

Christians must hold to a methodology and worldview that seeks to transcend all bias, including gender bias. Otherwise we will live in our bias, justifying our own beliefs in a circular fashion according to that bias. Culture or biology need not permanently color our worldview. With conscientious investigation our assumptions can be identified and tested. And any willful

<sup>11</sup> See A. C. Thiselton, Chapter 12, “The Hermeneutics of Liberation Theologies and Feminist Theologies: Socio-critical and Socio-Pragmatic Strands,” *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 410–469. For a review of the more radical feminist theology and blending of sources, see Chapter 4, “The Place of Christian Tradition in a Christian Feminist Theology,” in P. D. Young, *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology in Search of Method* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> Young, *Feminist Theology* 72.

<sup>13</sup> Clearly distinguishing between original meaning of Scripture and its application locates the essence of truth in its proper source, the objective, true revelation of God inspired by the Holy Spirit, not in the biases of men or women.

or impure motivation can be dealt with through submission to the Holy Spirit and interaction with God's word.

Interpretive issues are complex, and the elimination of bias is a struggle even for Christians. But many tools exist that, when utilized, prove helpful in overcoming gender and/or personal bias in interpretation. Therefore it is imperative to understand how important our presuppositions on knowledge, historical meaning, and context are to gaining knowledge and truth and discovering various types of bias in interpretation.

## II. INITIAL PRESUPPOSITIONS

All interpretation begins with presuppositions or assumptions. Presuppositions set the "context" for how we think, act, and believe. The importance of presuppositions is not that we have them but that we understand what they are and how they impact our viewpoint.

### 1. *Starting point: Is truth possible and accessible?*

. . . we ought not to listen to this sophistical argument about the impossibility of enquiry: for it will make us idle, and is sweet only to the sluggard; but the other saying will make us active and inquisitive.<sup>14</sup>

Socrates' pragmatic statement from the *Meno* points up the primary issue with accepting a relativistic view of knowledge. If knowledge is impossible or inaccessible, then attempting to gain it is useless and impractical. We have no choice but to live in our biases. If one accepts the sophist's view, gender bias will always infect the elucidation of Biblical texts.

2. *Is knowledge possible?* In our interaction with the world, we not only experience our own biased views but also those of others. Yet if we cannot transcend bias, knowledge is not established, and truth is not uncovered. In the world we observe that certain facts and experiences cannot be molded to fit all frameworks and theories. Thus the idea of exclusivity in knowledge and truth emerges.<sup>15</sup>

Theories are developed based upon facts available, and their validity is tested. Some criteria for truth are not dependent upon our personal situation and not relative to our worldviews. For example, logical principles are helpful in evaluating the coherence and meaning of a theory, a philosophy or a worldview.<sup>16</sup> A theory is accepted or rejected, as it fits the facts. If one gathers

<sup>14</sup> J. Harward, trans., *The Dialogues of Plato* (Chicago: William Benton, 1952) 180.

<sup>15</sup> "Part of what gives experience its 'bite' in forcing revisions in interpretive schemes is its resistance to unlimited interpretations. Experience may be shaped in several directions, but it is not infinitely plastic, and some constructions plainly do not fit." D. L. Wolfe, *The Justification of Belief* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1982) 63.

<sup>16</sup> The three laws of thought are: "The principle of non-contradiction asserts that no statement can be both true and false. The principle of identity asserts that if any statement is true, then it is true. The principle of excluded middle asserts that any statement is either true or false." I. Copi, *Introduction to Logic* (6th ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1982) 319–321.

enough facts, one's theory may change despite a particular bias, assuming one is open to change.<sup>17</sup> So although it is still possible that one may struggle with gender bias, it is also possible that one may overcome bias through a logical investigation and testing of the facts at hand.<sup>18</sup>

So even our initial philosophical presuppositions drive us to the conclusion that either knowledge is possible or no knowledge is possible. But if gender bias cannot be overcome, then no knowledge or truth is possible outside of two separate gender-biased experiences.

### III. HOW KNOWLEDGE IS POSSIBLE IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

1. *The hermeneutical spiral.* The hermeneutical spiral continually evaluates and tests knowledge and truth through attention to context. Relying upon this hermeneutical theory uncovers circular arguments. As a result, we are not so prone to base an interpretation upon a limited set of criteria that supports our biases.

The hermeneutical spiral is distinct from circular argumentation, where one sets out a definition, proposition or statement and then attempts to prove that statement by a synonym or a restatement of the same concept. Circular argumentation does not explain the meaning of a statement. Instead, the meaning is defined by those who already understand it.<sup>19</sup>

The hermeneutical spiral begins with the intended meaning of the author.<sup>20</sup> Written (and verbal) communication assumes the author is trying to communicate something and that there is someone who is capable of understanding that message. To reject the intended meaning of the author leaves the text adrift of a way to categorize major points and subpoints of the argument.<sup>21</sup> Without anchoring meaning in the text to the author's "consciously willed" intention, one's own assumptions are placed upon the text, and meaning becomes moored primarily in the reader's assumptions.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> See Wolfe, Chapter 3, "The Problem of Criteria," *Justification* 43–69.

<sup>18</sup> This argument is an evidential approach to the discovery of knowledge. This approach asserts that knowledge is accessible, testable, and capable of verification even among those in the secular world. The most notable proponent of this approach today is J. W. Montgomery. The evidential approach is completely consistent with the theory and practice of the hermeneutical spiral as discussed at length later.

<sup>19</sup> Copi lists 5 rules for definitions: (1) A definition should state the essential attributes of the species. (2) A definition must not be circular. (3) A definition must be neither too broad nor too narrow. (4) A definition must not be expressed in ambiguous, obscure or figurative language. (5) A definition should not be negative where it can be affirmative (*Logic* 165–169).

<sup>20</sup> The definition of the author's "intended" meaning is variously disputed. I use it here as in Walter Kaiser's definition, "to understand the author is to understand the intention of the divine author." W. C. Kaiser and M. Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 41.

<sup>21</sup> The purpose of the author becomes critical in determining the emphasis of the text. Purpose is imbedded in the concept of "genre," and the genre is chosen by the author from various options "within" the culture.

<sup>22</sup> The text is "consciously willed," because one must consider what one is to state and how it should be stated so the communication may be shared, coherent, and correspond to various other

In *Validity in Interpretation*, E. D. Hirsch, Jr. deals in great detail with the implications of divorcing the author's intention from the text. Hirsch argues that the author's verbal meaning is "determinate," or it contains boundaries of definition.<sup>23</sup> These boundaries of definition are not necessarily tied to a particular culture or society in a way that makes definition inaccessible to those in other cultural or historical time periods.<sup>24</sup> It also follows that, if the meaning is "determinate," it "requires a determining will."<sup>25</sup> The will of the author ultimately determines "implications" in the text that "have degrees of emphasis or importance with respect to one another."<sup>26</sup> Many definitions, then, are accessible to readers both through the author's definitions and through public understanding of those definitions. Thus textual meaning is both reproducible and sharable with others.<sup>27</sup> If the author's definitions are available to us, we are not so prone to read our own definitions into the material and by doing so create biased interpretations.

2. *The generic meaning of the text.* The generic meaning or "big" picture of the text is discovered through inductive exegesis of the greater context. One of Hirsch's contributions to the concept of "genre" is that of the "big

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parts of the argument or meanings stated in the text. One must also make a distinction between "the author's intention to convey a meaning and, on the other hand, his effectiveness in conveying it." E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967) 12. See also pages 47–48 on the discussion of context in meaning.

<sup>23</sup> Even ambiguous meaning has boundaries. "An ambiguous meaning has a boundary like any other verbal meaning, and that one of the frontiers on this boundary is that between ambiguity and univocality. Some parts of the boundary might, of course, be thick; that is, there might at some points be a good many submeanings that belonged equally to the meaning and not to it—borderline meanings. However, such ambiguities would, on another level, simply serve to define the character of the meaning so that any overly precise construing of it would constitute a misunderstanding. Determinacy, then, first of all means self-identity. This is the minimum requirement for shareability. Without it neither communication nor validity in interpretation would be possible" (ibid. 44–45).

<sup>24</sup> Hirsch counters the argument that history is time-bound and generally inaccessible to those living in contemporary times. "It should be remembered that the language and assumptions within a culture can be highly variable, so that it might easily be the case that a modern reader could have learned the particular language of a particular author more intimately than any contemporary who spoke the same language . . . The radical historicist is rather sentimentally attached to the belief that only our own cultural entities have 'authentic' immediacy for us. That is why we cannot 'truly' understand the texts of the past, such 'true' understanding being reserved for contemporary texts, and all understanding of the past being 'abstract' and constructed." But, in fact, all understanding of cultural entities past or present is 'constructed.' . . . In all cases, what we understand is a construction, and if the construction happens to be unthinking and automatic, it is not necessarily more vital and authentic for that" (ibid. 43).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 46.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 101.

<sup>27</sup> This view corresponds with Scriptural injunctions to "share" the gospel. The Bible assumes the gospel contains information reproducible and sharable for all time. Consider Jesus' words in John 17:17–21 when he prays for the disciples and those who believe in him through their words, "I sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in the truth. I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in me through their word" (NASB).

idea,” or purpose, of a text. This purpose is determined by the authorial will. The authorial will is

not arbitrary but channeled within social forms and unified by an idea . . . The author has an idea of what he wants to convey—not an abstract concept, of course, but an idea equivalent to what we called an intrinsic genre. In the course of realizing this idea, he wills the meanings which subserve it.<sup>28</sup>

This generic idea is continually refined throughout the process of interpretation. Such refining allows for an adjusting of the idea to “fit the facts.” Hirsch argues that the common notion of the “hermeneutical circle” is broken by aspects of this refining process. The traditional formulation of the hermeneutical circle suggests “an idea of the whole controls, connects, and unifies our understanding of the parts” and “the idea of the whole . . . arises from an encounter with the parts.”<sup>29</sup>

Hirsch points out that the “encounter” between part and whole “could not occur if the parts did not have an autonomy capable of suggesting a certain kind of whole in the first place.”<sup>30</sup> The parts of the text are called “traits.” Since “not all traits are genre-dependent (the same ones can belong to different genres), and not everything in verbal understanding is variable,” the process of circular reasoning is broken.<sup>31</sup> So we find the hermeneutical circle is not as circular and paradoxical as previously thought.<sup>32</sup>

Use of the hermeneutical spiral does not guarantee objectivity from bias. But it allows “the text to continue to challenge and correct those alternative interpretations, then to guide my delineation of its significance for my situation today.”<sup>33</sup> The hermeneutical spiral breaks the “hermeneutical circle” and by doing so makes knowledge accessible to the reader.

3. *The Holy Spirit as author of the Biblical text: Authorial intention in the text.* Evangelicals recognize that in some sense there are two authors of the Biblical text, the human writer and the Holy Spirit. Additional interpretive challenges arise here. Two differing views on authorial intention are found in Walter C. Kaiser and Moisés Silva’s *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*.<sup>34</sup>

Kaiser argues for an author-centered text. He believes “to understand the author is to understand the intention of the divine author.”<sup>35</sup> Silva, on the other hand, posits that “the meaning of a Biblical passage need not be identified completely with the author’s intention.”<sup>36</sup> By this he means to leave the door open to a type of “sensus plenior,” or a fuller meaning, of the text.

<sup>28</sup> Hirsch, *Validity* 101.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 76.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 77.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> G. R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991) 6.

<sup>34</sup> Kaiser and Silva, *Introduction* 41.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 246.

Indeed, anyone who believes that the primary origin of the Bible lies in an omniscient and foreseeing God can hardly doubt that there is considerable meaning in the Biblical text that the human authors were not fully aware of.<sup>37</sup>

The part that systematic theology (“analogy of faith”) plays in the interpretive process drives this controversy. Silva begins the exegetical process assuming “the Case for Calvinistic Hermeneutics” whereas Kaiser intends to use the “analogy of antecedent Scripture” (analogy of faith) as one aspect of exegesis to consider after exegesis.<sup>38</sup> Although it is in some ways impossible to approach Scripture without certain preconceived “systematics,” one can and should consciously question any underlying systematic theology when proper exegesis reveals a differing view.<sup>39</sup> And many in both the egalitarian and the complementarian camps have developed specific “systematics” of gender roles and nature.<sup>40</sup>

We must all learn to acknowledge that the potential exists for our systematic statements to consciously or unconsciously override exegesis, regardless of our theological orientation. So at times we are all in danger of importing bias into our interpretations, including our own gender biases.

Whether we should consider the possibility of a deeper meaning resident within the text hinges upon the definition of “author’s” intent. Klein suggests that the author’s intention is rooted in what the text means.<sup>41</sup> If we define “intention” too broadly, it is impossible to recover all of the author’s thoughts and emotions within the text.

Only what we receive in the text is salvageable. Since the text has been ordained by God in the form in which it comes down to us now, it seems that the better assumption for limiting potential bias is to adopt Kaiser’s view that “to understand the author is to understand the intention of the divine author.”<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps there is a fuller sense in Scripture, but if there is, how do we test or validate these senses? Practically speaking, at this point we are on purely subjective grounds. Achieving unity in theory or in practice among evangelicals will be more difficult, if we hold out for a “sensus plenior” within the text. Furthermore, the more subjective the meaning of the text (or the more ambiguous the historical-grammatical evidence is), the more leeway one has to interpolate bias, and/or the more tentative the hypothetical interpretation becomes.

4. *Meaning and significance.* When we reconstruct the authorial intention of a passage, we must include the historical-cultural context and the grammatical context (historical-grammatical method). Then the author’s

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.; Chapter 14 in Kaiser, *Exegetical Theology* 134–138.

<sup>39</sup> For a good evaluation of these arguments see H. W. Johnson, “The ‘Analogy of Faith’ and Exegetical Methodology: A Preliminary Discussion on Relationships,” *JETS* 31 (1988) 69–80.

<sup>40</sup> For a systematized statement of the two positions, see the “Danvers Statement” from the “Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood” and the corresponding statement of the organization “Christians for Biblical Equality.”

<sup>41</sup> Klein, Blomberg, Hubbard, *Introduction* 118–120.

<sup>42</sup> Kaiser and Silva, *Introduction* 41.

meaning to the original audience informs our present-day application of that meaning.

After we determine the meaning of the text, we must bring the significance of that meaning into our own lives: We apply the text to our situation. As with the difficulties elsewhere in the interpretive process, presuppositions become important. Cotterell and Turner suggest that significance is impacted by the hearers' understanding not only of the "sense" or meaning of the passage, but also by "presupposition pools" that they share or do not share with the speaker, or in this case, the author.<sup>43</sup>

These presupposition pools are roughly equivalent to asking questions like: What was the original recipients' understanding of the material presented? Were they Jewish or Gentile? How did they live their lives in that culture? What were the challenges of following this new teaching in that culture? How might they misunderstand this new teaching? How does the author clarify his points? And, how was that culture similar or dissimilar to ours today?

It is equally important to understand our own cultural baggage and to ask questions such as: How might my cultural understanding limit my understanding of this text? How is marriage different now from the first century? How is it the same? Do I have a tendency to view Scripture as individual or as a member of my particular community? What specific ideologies may I read into texts because I am a white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class, American working woman raised in California?

If the distinction between author's intent and reader's understanding does not take place, a type of reader-response method ensues. If we unintentionally employ even a limited reader-response method, we risk the destruction, or blurring, of the boundaries of the subject-object distinction of the author and reader. In other words, we rewrite the author's text: Our meaning becomes the author's meaning.

Reader-response at its worst results in either a Hegelian dialectic (the meaning of the text plus my meaning equals the truth) or a complete subsuming of the text into one's own bias. The author's intended meaning becomes lost in the readers' response to it. There are, of course, varying degrees in which interpreters may err in this, but constant attention to the relation of the author to the original recipients helps reduce the potential to read bias into one's interpretations.

The question of contextualization arises here. Contextualization emphasizes the shift between the context of Scripture and the present context.<sup>44</sup> Moisés Silva defines contextualization in the following way.

To interpret the biblical text . . . involves a contextual shift. Even when I seek merely to express what Paul meant . . . I am constrained to do so in my situation: with English rather than Greek, with modern rather than ancient idioms, with Western nuances rather than Middle Eastern thought forms. In other words, all forms of interpretation necessarily include a measure of

<sup>43</sup> P. Cotterell and M. Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989) 94.

<sup>44</sup> M. Silva, *Has the Church Misread the Bible?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 23.

contextualization. This point is a little frightening because it appears to relativize Scripture.”<sup>45</sup>

Contextualization is easier when we identify the reader and author “pre-supposition pools” as previously mentioned. But Christian history and experience can also be an aid to proper contextualization of Scripture.

Anthony Thiselton suggests that engagement with the Biblical text can transform the reader, if proper differentiation is made between the reader’s horizon and the text’s horizon.<sup>46</sup> Thiselton argues that a certain amount of knowledge is possible based upon Wittgensteinian language games theory. And his thesis provides additional keys for proper contextualization.

Thiselton observes facts about the experience of language. He categorizes and interprets these facts. And he uses a hermeneutical spiral within Wittgenstein’s “language game” concept. In this “game,” linguistic facts interpret other facts based upon various uses of logical analysis.<sup>47</sup> Thiselton demonstrates that the language game contains rules that transcend its context, such as the law of non-contradiction implied in nests or groupings of logical propositions and, in Thiselton’s opinion, theological tradition.<sup>48</sup> This language game theory is similar to the hermeneutical spiral, where information is refined to “fit the facts.”

Thiselton brilliantly addresses the existential mindset with his paradigm of linguistic analysis drawn from life experience. This paradigm suggests that knowledge is presumed to exist partly by the daily use and real expectations we have of human language working on our behalf to explain, persuade, and convince others of a point of view.

Linguistic, historical, and religious tradition is pressed into service by Thiselton to yield factual information that can be analyzed and understood in light of “the hermeneutical spiral” of a Wittgensteinian language game. Thiselton gives insight into the linguistic understanding within certain traditions and historical settings. Linguistic and historical definitions within specific traditions can assist public comprehension of the concepts involved. For example, Thiselton states,

[C]oncepts like “being redeemed,” “being spoken to by God,” and so on, are made intelligible and “teachable” *not on the basis of private existential experience but on the basis of a public tradition of certain patterns of behavior*. Just as what “pain” means depends on observable regularities in pain-behavior, so what “redemption” means depends on observable regularities in redemption-behavior . . . What redemption . . . is, can best be seen not from “my own experience” but from recurring salvation-patterns in the Exodus, the wilderness

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> A. C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) xix.

<sup>47</sup> Thiselton breaks these “rules” into 3 classes. See Chapter XIV of *The Two Horizons*, “Wittgenstein, Grammar and the New Testament” 386–427.

<sup>48</sup> “Secondly, if even some of our examples hold, we need to be hesitant about describing *all* assumptions which ‘lie apart from the route travelled by inquiry’ as necessarily being *culture* relative rather than as belonging to a given *theological* tradition” (ibid. 393, 400–401).

wanderings, the Judges, and so on . . . Old Testament history provides a necessary starting-point for the elucidation of concepts.<sup>49</sup>

So Thiselton's discussion helps answer the current postmodern concern that bias permeates and drives all cultural contexts. Cultural contexts are not completely relative to particular times and places. Christianity does not exist in a historical vacuum but in time, space, and life as documented through a long reliable historical, written witness and through a particular, observable, Christian religious experience and practice.<sup>50</sup>

Christian history and experience corroborate facts found in Scripture over centuries. So keys to the proper contextualization or interpretation of the meaning of Scripture for society today can also be found in Christian history, tradition, and experience as well as in grammatical-historical investigations and understanding of presupposition pools.

Still, even with Thiselton's additional contributions to hermeneutic theory in light of Christian history and tradition, we must not lose sight of the author-centered text. Rejecting an author-centered text misses key elements in the author's definitions, historical understanding, and assumptions about God and man. Bias occurs when present-day definitions replace author-intended ones. The historical-Biblical revelation then takes on characteristics of the current cultural context. If Scripture can mean contradictory things in different historical contexts, then there is no true definition or application for Scripture outside of ourselves and our experiences. We import bias from each era into the text, and our interpretations and applications of Scripture are meaningless.

So, for the purpose of proper contextualization, it is legitimate and necessary to pursue a definite distinction between authorial meaning and significance to the recipient. This insures that the essential principles or situations represented in a Scriptural passage match the same situations or principles the exegete and/or reader is struggling to apply.

5. *Grammatical-historical exegesis.* A commitment to the empirical method of grammatical-historical exegesis insures the checks and balances of the hermeneutical spiral. Assuming this inductive exegetical method at the beginning of textual investigations carries less potential to complicate the issue of bias in interpretation.

The alternative to placing primary emphasis upon this method in interpretation is to presuppose additional ideological content at the outset of the interpretive process. This weights the interpretation towards a particular end and adds to potential bias. For example, if one consciously assumes the ideology of one's systematic theology prior to the exegesis of the passage, the interpretation is colored by the content of the ideology imposed upon the text. On the other hand, if one exegetes the text with a primary emphasis on this

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 382.

<sup>50</sup> Hirsch demonstrated the same point earlier that public understanding of definitions assists in interpretation. Thiselton takes this one step further, arguing that Christian history, experience, and practice are public and accessible for the purpose of attaining knowledge.

method, one may confront the limitations of one's systematic theology and come to a deeper understanding of what the text actually says.

A commitment to grammatical-historical exegesis does not mean that one cannot employ other methodologies to discover truth about the text, including application of modern approaches. Aspects of literary criticism, genre analysis, character and literary development of plot, theme, etc., may be genuinely helpful in either determining or clarifying the author's intent. Grammatical-historical exegesis simply lays a solid foundation for determining the meaning of the text, so that other approaches may add depth and breadth to the ideas contained therein.

6. *Validation and probability.* We should speak in terms of probabilities, when we discuss validation of various interpretive theories. The evidence is accumulated, weighed, and adjusted, and one's interpretation is put forth on the basis of the weight of the evidence.<sup>51</sup> Bias may be greatly limited by proper hermeneutical processes, and we may come to great probable certainty in many areas.

But when evidence is sparse or limited, we must not go any farther than the evidence suggests. Neither should we speak dogmatically in areas where great questions still remain.<sup>52</sup>

Yet we should not fear paradox in Scripture, gray areas or lack of information.<sup>53</sup> Although we do hold that Scripture is perspicuous, this does not mean that God has revealed all things comprehensively. Tensions still exist in Biblical interpretation. As Moisés Silva states,

It may well be that the one great aim in our own interpretation of Scripture must be that of resisting the temptation to eliminate the tensions, to emphasize certain features of the Bible at the expense of others.<sup>54</sup>

Ultimately, the temptation to eliminate tensions or interpolate thought content results in bias. We must work hard to recognize the tensions in Biblical interpretation. Striving for introspective diagnoses of our own interpretive and personal prejudices will also help to overcome bias in interpretation.

7. *Appeal to the authority of Church tradition.* Many times we rely on the Church fathers for help in understanding Scriptural passages. But we encounter inherent difficulties in passages that refer to women's nature and

<sup>51</sup> Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction* 146.

<sup>52</sup> Reconciling gender issues in Scripture may eventually reach this point. Complexities of application abound in the study of women's roles. Sorting out the "time bound elements" can be very difficult and controversial (see Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction* 409).

<sup>53</sup> "Paradox,' when used of nonscientific explanations, does not mean 'logical contradiction' but simply points to a reality beyond empirical reach" (Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral* 398). In the NT, Paul refers to "the mystery of Christ . . . which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit" (Eph 3:3). And God retains some mysteries for himself: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law" (Deut 29:29; cf. 1 Cor 2:11–13).

<sup>54</sup> M. Silva, *Misread* 38.

roles. Ruth Tucker and Walter Liefeld in *Daughters of the Church* review positive and negative features of the history and theology of the Fathers.<sup>55</sup>

There is great value in the writings of these early interpreters as they are studied in context. Yet there is still much to be explained about the poor view of women some of the Fathers put forth, views that suggested women were “symbolic of evil,” “of lesser intellect,” were not fully the image of God without man, or lacked a “soul.”<sup>56</sup> Before we can cite any Church father in his opinion on women’s place in the church, a thorough investigation should be done on any cultural or gender biases that may have impacted that particular writer’s interpretation of passages on women.<sup>57</sup>

8. *Human understanding and the Holy Spirit.* The Holy Spirit plays a critical role in bridging the gap between our own understanding of ourselves, our gender differences, and our culture. He illuminates our understanding of how to apply the text. Illumination creates a “dialogue” with the text and, as Clark Pinnock suggests, helps us to “know what to do with it in Christian experience.”<sup>58</sup> Significance is in many ways “inspired” by the Holy Spirit. Thus the combined interaction of proper exegetical technique with the illumination of the Holy Spirit results in the discovery of legitimate contemporary parallels that are anchored in the historical and grammatical aspects of the text.

In areas of insight, creativity, motivation, and conviction, the Holy Spirit illuminates Christians and sets our course in determining the meaning and the corresponding significance of Biblical passages.<sup>59</sup> The Holy Spirit speaks through logic and clear communication as well as through illumination. So we must learn to respect the written word of God as the Holy Spirit speaking in concrete terms to us.

<sup>55</sup> Ruth Tucker and Walter Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church: Women and Ministry from New Testament Times to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).

<sup>56</sup> Women are portrayed as “symbolic of evil” in the Shepherd of Hermas (*Daughters* 96); Luther stated in his commentary on Gen 1:27 that women were of weaker intellect (*ibid.* 174); in the early years of the medieval Church “men debated whether women had a soul . . . By a majority of just one vote, they answered in the affirmative” (*ibid.* 130, quoting Marlys Taege, *And God Gave Women Talents!* [St. Louis: Concordia, 1978] 86; see also J. Chrysostom, Discourse 4 on Gen 1:2). Augustine refers to man as the image of God. When woman is alone, she is not the image of God; only in respect to the man does she reflect God’s image (*De Trinitate* 7.7.10 as quoted in R. R. Ruether’s *Sexism and God-Talk* [Boston: Beacon, 1983] 95).

<sup>57</sup> Consider the Reformation. Martin Luther took on his contemporaries, teachers, and predecessors over the place of Scripture over tradition. His famous debate with Erasmus clearly demonstrates the fact that earlier Church fathers had erred in the theology of “free will,” Biblical interpretation, and prior views on the relationship of theology to philosophy. See the original text of the debate in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation* (ed. E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969). The Church fathers have been wrong before. Therefore, it is appropriate to evaluate the issue and ask the question whether they could be wrong about women.

<sup>58</sup> C. H. Pinnock, “The Role of the Spirit in Interpretation” *JETS* 36 (1993) 494.

<sup>59</sup> The Holy Spirit is teacher and helper who abides with us forever (John 14:16, 26). He leads us in proper interpretation of the Bible because he is “the Spirit of truth” (John 14:17). He convicts us of sin and guides us in all truth (John 15:8, 13).

## IV. THE REDUCTION OF GENDER BIAS IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Most, if not all, evangelicals hold a high view of Scripture and would agree that unbiased interpretation is possible to a certain extent. But can all bias be eliminated by everyone involved? Perhaps not, but the better we theologians execute our craft, the more we will be able to strip away the dross and agree about the essentials of the passages. Only in this way will we be in a position to equip the men and women we serve. We may not have exhaustive knowledge, or closure in all areas, but we will have adequate knowledge (2 Tim 3:17).

Ultimately, how each of the previous areas of Biblical interpretation are understood and applied contributes to the reduction of gender bias by men and women. For example, currently the greatest accusations of gender bias are found in various interpretations of the roles of women and men. How do we weigh possible conflicts in Biblical evidence and to what should we appeal when there may be incomplete information available in the text itself, or when several different interpretations seem plausible?<sup>60</sup>

My argument in this paper suggests that, in addressing the issue of gender bias, we should appeal to the most objective interpretive processes first before resorting to less objective alternatives that can import limited but additional bias into the text. The most objective processes deal with initial presuppositions regarding truth and knowledge, acceptance of the existence and necessity of an author-centered text and the hermeneutical spiral, attention to a separation of meaning and significance, use of grammatical-historical exegesis as an interpretive base, and critical usage of the Church fathers. In some cases, alternatives including use of systematic theology at the outset of exegesis or the limited use of various modern approaches such as genre analysis have concrete strengths when utilized properly. In the proper place, these techniques may represent the Biblical meaning more fully.

Also, a continual testing and correcting of one's facts and presuppositions is necessary to eliminate bias. This includes a challenge to all sides of the evangelical community to continue to evaluate together God's intention for women and men in church, home, and society, so that the hermeneutical spiral can do its best work in sorting out our own personal and cultural bias. Perhaps authors in the opposing egalitarian and complementarian camps can co-write articles that will more clearly define not just areas of agreements or disagreements but also areas in which further work must be done to overcome gender bias.

<sup>60</sup> Consider Thomas Schreiner's view on the cause of "women's deception" in 1 Tim 2:12. Suggesting that their "kinder and gentler nature" would keep women from excluding people for doctrinal error, he posits that women are therefore less likely to preserve the apostolic tradition inhabiting the teaching office ("Dialogue," 145). Yet no "kind and gentle women" appear in the text. The immediate context of 1 Tim 2:9-12 documents some immature women who flaunt adornment. Neither does the greater context of the book suggest that women's deception derives from "kindness and gentleness." On what foundation does this interpretation rest, if not in the primary text — observations and experience? If so, how far can we trust personal experience, observation, or even our personal convictions on popularly derived, selected statistical information, to "fill" in the interpretive gaps on an issue as important as women's nature? Then how much weight do we give to such evidence in relation to other critical, interpretive criteria?

More overviews of the Biblical books can be provided to help determine “the big picture” of the text and how it relates to a passage before imposing a systematic theology that either complicates or elucidates the meaning.

We should also always remember that the profits reaped from engaging the hermeneutical spiral are gleaned from scholarship testing and retesting the facts of grammar, Scripture, history, culture, personal presuppositions, and context of Scripture. Thus, ideally, Biblical truth resulting from proper scholarship is based on fact and testable reality, not on shallow appeals to authority or consensus of opinion.

Attention to one’s systematic theology is critical. If a passage needs clarification because there is a lack of information, a strong systematic statement of issues impacting the passage is helpful. For example, how do we best explain some difficulties in the OT interpretation of women? Old Testament women had more freedom and dignity than those in the surrounding cultures, but NT women had even greater freedom than OT women. What does this signify to us today? Answers to questions like these must be aided by a systematic study of the Bible.

Proper attention to the definition of terms is essential in discussions. What terms do we utilize to describe Christian truth to our culture or congregation? One must insure that “loaded” terminology such as “patriarchy” or “oppression” or even “traditionalist” or “feminist” is not used without clear definition. Where ambiguity reigns in definition, unintended meanings flourish and bias creeps in.

However, some difficult questions must be asked prior to invoking the support of the Church fathers on gender issues, lest gender bias is injected into the debate. First, how much did society condition them? In what areas are they the most influenced? Is there evidence that all Church fathers are biased or only a few? Second, is their reading of Scripture accurate? Do they use a hermeneutic that represents a more literal view of Scripture or an allegorical or symbolic one that is not tied to the text? Third, do we understand their argument and agree with the argument itself or only the conclusion? If the argument is not logical, fitting the Biblical facts, we should suspect the conclusion. Fourth, how does a particular view of differing ecclesiology or ascetic doctrines impact their view on women?<sup>61</sup>

More collaboration by church historians and theologians can and should be done. Such interdisciplinary articles can provide a larger perspective on the challenges of interpreting the Church fathers on women’s issues and may contribute to more adequate solutions and understanding among evangelicals.

We must realize that the temptation to eliminate all tensions in Scripture or interpolate content to alleviate the tensions may result in bias. We must work hard to recognize the true tensions in Biblical interpretation. We can

<sup>61</sup> Tucker and Liefeld suggest, “It should be kept in mind that the men who denied women access to liturgical ministries did so on the basis of views concerning ordination, the Eucharist, and celibacy that many today (Catholics among them) challenge. Those who hold traditional views need to know what that tradition included. The Biblical hermeneutics and ecclesiastical assumptions of the Church fathers require careful attention. The issues are both important and complex” (*Daughters of the Church* 127).

hold that there are Scriptural paradoxes that point to a greater reality. Genuine paradoxes will always carry unresolved tensions, because they distinguish God's unlimited nature in contrast to mankind's limitations. In these cases we may need to define very general principles in the passage to apply. We should never feel compelled to fill in the gaps simply to draw an detailed application for the audience.

Some of the greatest minds in evangelical theology have struggled with the passages on women's role in church, home, and society. As mentioned before, many have agreed that we encounter some very difficult hermeneutical problems in Genesis 1–3, 1 Tim 2:12–15, 1 Corinthians 11 and 14.<sup>62</sup>

We must come to the table honestly if we do not have enough information to assert particular positions dogmatically, even if we hold to these positions within our own Christian tradition. Perhaps the interpretation of certain passages will never be fully clarified.

Regardless of various “complementarian” or “egalitarian” stances, we must all commit to work on our own gender biases, for we all have them. How many of us still say or think in anger or exasperation, men are so . . . or, women are so . . . Instead of placing the blame for situations or conflicts on gender idiosyncrasies, let us try to understand the broader issues and Biblical injunctions to walk in the Holy Spirit, so we may develop true character in our interaction with each other. I include myself in this exhortation.

## V. CONCLUSION

The philosophical and practical tools exist that enable Christians to transcend bias, including gender bias, in Biblical interpretation. Evidence suggests that truth can be discovered and all historical contexts are not relative to personal bias. Furthermore, it is necessary to seek unbiased, sharable and reproducible knowledge in interpretation, so we do not twist the intent of God's Word into culture-bound meanings.

How Christians deal with the essentials of truth and reality in hermeneutics will impact their views on gender issues and gender bias. Yet Christians transcend many of the difficulties in interpretation and establish common ground between men and women simply by understanding and applying the deeper philosophical and hermeneutical issues involved in Biblical interpretation.

The meaning of Biblical passages can be discovered despite our gender biases. But we must use proper hermeneutical methodology, depend on the illumination of the Holy Spirit, and take responsibility for ourselves by committing to plumb the depth of our own cultural, personal, and gender biases for the purpose and goal of seeking truth.

<sup>62</sup> See footnote 8.