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## Review Essay

### THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT'S DISCOURSE ON GENDER AND THE BIBLE

*Susanne Scholz*

On March 11, 2004, President George W. Bush spoke to the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) during its annual convention in Colorado Springs. An organization of 30 million Americans, the NAE has given full support to Bush, who spoke via teleconference to the convention's attendees. Bush, mentioning his opposition to gay marriage, certain forms of abortion, and gene research, knew that his audience endorsed a conservative agenda. Bold religious (and androcentric) rhetoric laced his speech, in which he asserted, "Human life is a creation of God, not a commodity to be exploited by man." The speech was noteworthy enough to warrant coverage by the *New York Times*, which ran the article in its main section.<sup>1</sup>

Ordinarily, I would have glanced at an article such as this, shaken my head about the unfortunate but powerful alliance between the Christian Right and the current administration in the United States, and moved on. This time, however, I cut out the article and copied it for my students. I understood more fully to whom Bush spoke, because I was already involved in reviewing the Christian Right's discussion on gender and the Bible. I had visited the Web site of the NAE, as well as those of some of its member organizations, such as the Christian Coalition of America, Jerry Falwell Ministries, Concerned Women for America, Focus on the Family, and especially the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood.<sup>2</sup> The latter organization focuses on gender issues, publishes the *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, and sponsors conferences aiming to educate the American public about "biblical manhood and

<sup>1</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick, "Bush Assures Evangelicals of His Commitment to Amendment on Marriage," *New York Times*, March 12, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> See, respectively, <http://www.nae.net/>, <https://www.cc.org/>, <http://www.falwell.com/>, <http://www.cwfa.org/>, <http://www.family.org/>, and <http://www.cbmw.org/>.

womanhood.”<sup>3</sup> Not only had I studied these and other Web sites of Christian fundamentalist organizations, I was also in the process of reading more than ten books on gender and the Bible, all written by men of fundamentalist Christian convictions.<sup>4</sup> I was not at all pleased with what I found, but I was beginning to understand the links between the political Right and evangelical gender talk.

My project took its initial inspiration from an article published in this journal in 2003. In “Men in Biblical Scholarship,” Esther Fuchs examined the strategies of male Bible scholars who engage with feminist exegesis.<sup>5</sup> I enjoyed Fuchs’s essay for its unambiguous criticism of scholarly co-optation into androcentric perspective. Fuchs’s argumentation was refreshingly essentialist, but this characteristic is also a limitation. A critique that does not consider right-wing publications of the 1990s is incomplete when such books make it to the top of Web searches for “Bible and gender” at popular book sites such as Amazon’s.<sup>6</sup> In a politically, culturally, and religiously conservative climate, progressive feminist Bible scholars benefit from understanding how evangelical writers, most of them men, address gender issues. When even George W. Bush feels free to publicly align himself with an organization of the Christian Right, progressive scholars of all persuasions have to ask, How has it happened that Christian conservatives have gained the attention of the political elite while scholarly organizations such as the Society of Biblical Literature and progressive religious organizations such as the National Council of Churches work in relative oblivion?

Currently, few mainstream researchers of biblical studies take into account the Christian Right’s discourse. A rare example is Athalya Brenner’s book re-

<sup>3</sup> See the organization’s fivefold “purposes” at <http://www.cbmw.org/about/danvers.php#purposes> (accessed January 9, 2005). The *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* can be found at <http://www.cbmw.org/journal>. Among the members of CBMW and the Board of Reference of the journal are Jerry Falwell and several authors whose work I discuss in this article, such as Jack Cottrell, Wayne A. Grudem, C. J. Mahaney, and John Piper. The editor of the journal, Bruce A. Ware, is senior associate dean at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, in Louisville, Kentucky.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion on the origins and definition of the term *fundamentalism*, see Malise Ruthven, *Fundamentalism: The Search for Meaning* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1–34.

<sup>5</sup> Esther Fuchs, “Men in Biblical Scholarship,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 19, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 93–114.

<sup>6</sup> On May 5, 2004, a search for “Bible and gender” at <http://www.amazon.com/> presented the following three titles at the top of the list: Mark L. Strauss, *Distorting Scripture? The Challenge of Bible Translation and Gender Accuracy* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1998); Jack W. Cottrell, *Gender Roles and the Bible: Creation, the Fall, and Redemption; A Critique of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1994); and Vern Sheridan Poythress and Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God’s Words* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2000). All of these books’ authors are complementarians or traditionalists, as I will discuss in this article.

view of an evangelical commentary written by Tremper Longman. The particular series in which the commentary appeared is known for its conservative orientation but usually not challenged for it. Brenner, however, made clear her opposition to such Christian evangelical perspective when she stated firmly, "I cannot recommend this book to anyone who does not share [Longman's] own confessional stance."<sup>7</sup> We require more of such frankness. In a time when right-wing scholarly organizations and publications flourish, the religious, political, and cultural sociologies of biblical readings need to be identified and evaluated.<sup>8</sup>

Accordingly, progressive feminist exegetes need to be aware about Christian conservative organizations such as the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW). The council was founded in 1987 by "several evangelical leaders," according to its Web site, and is influential among evangelical authors who write prolifically on the Bible and gender. Among its stated purposes is "to study and set forth the Biblical view of the relationship between men and women, especially in the home and in the church."<sup>9</sup> Needless to say, men dominate the organization. Of the seven members of the Board of Directors, only one is a woman, and she is the "secretary." Similarly, of the twenty-eight council members, only six are women. Four of them self-identify as "homemakers," one as a "pastor's wife," and one as a "director of Women's Missionary Union and Women's Ministries."<sup>10</sup> Several members of the CBMW publish consistently on gendered Bible readings with a wide reach among evangelical Christians. It is important for mainstream and progressive Bible scholars, feminist and otherwise, to learn about their ideas and arguments. This review essay contributes to such an understanding.

### **The Bible and Gender in U.S. Evangelical Publications since the 1990s**

Within the context of conservative American Christianity, three major positions characterize the Christian evangelical discourse on gender and the Bible. All three positions share the conviction that the Bible is the "inspired word of God," but they differ on the meaning of gender in biblical texts. Probably the most influential and politically powerful position, which this review

<sup>7</sup> Athalya Brenner, review of *Song of Songs*, by Tremper Longman, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66, no. 2 (April 2004): 293.

<sup>8</sup> Some of this work is certainly well underway, but it does not yet characterize the field. For an excellent example of such work, see Daniel Patte, ed., *Global Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.cbmw.org/about/danvers.php> (accessed January 9, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> See, respectively, <http://www.cbmw.org/about/board-director.php> (accessed December 20, 2004); and <http://www.cbmw.org/about/council.php> (accessed January 9, 2005).

essay examines at length, is called “complementarian.” Sometimes it is also identified as “hierarchicalism” or “traditionalism.”<sup>11</sup> Its proponents maintain that women and men are equal according to the biblical record, but they have different tasks in church and society. Another position is called “egalitarian,” and in evangelical circles the egalitarians are viewed as “feminists.”<sup>12</sup> They reject the complementarian notion of “equal but different,” because to them the Bible supports women’s equal participation in church and society. They struggle against being silenced or excluded from the larger evangelical community, in which the complementarian position dominates.

Yet another position contributes to the Christian Right’s discourse on gender and the Bible, held by evangelical Christian theologians who do not explicitly affiliate with either the complementarian or the egalitarian position. This “moderate evangelical” stance engages Christian conservative, mainstream, and even progressive Bible research, and mainstream publishers, such as Paulist Press and Eerdmans Publishing Company, print the work of these Christian writers. Still, these authors are firmly rooted in the sociopolitical and religious context of the American Christian Right.

Let me now present the main arguments of the three positions as they appear in the reviewed evangelical literature. Limitations characterize any literature review, and this one is no exception. The enormous number of publications has made it necessary to refer to a limited number of titles only, but even a selective review helps to understand the conservative Christian American discourse on gender and the Bible.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, the following three sections illuminate authors and their sociopolitical and religious convictions. A final section considers the implications of this proliferating evangelical discourse for progressive feminist studies of the Bible.

<sup>11</sup> Complementarians are “uncomfortable” with the label “traditionalist” and outright reject the label “hierarchicalist,” because it does not connote “mutual interdependence”; see, for example, John Piper and Wayne A. Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), xiv. For a rejection of “complementarian” and a preference for “traditionalist,” see Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), 15. See also her earlier work *Women Caught in the Conflict: The Culture War between Traditionalism and Feminism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Sometimes they are also called “biblical feminists”; see Cottrell, *Gender Roles and the Bible*, 18–20. For an extensive discussion of egalitarian biblical feminism, see Jack Cottrell, *Feminism and the Bible: An Introduction to Feminism for Christians* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1992), 239–338.

<sup>13</sup> For a bibliography of complementarian and egalitarian publications, see, for instance, William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 281–85. Also see the annotated bibliography in each issue of the *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*.

### The Complementarian, or Traditionalist, Position

Publications of the complementarian, or traditionalist, position are the theological backbone of the Christian Right's discourse on gender and the Bible. The mostly male and seemingly all white authors are influential and powerful leaders in evangelical organizations, most prominently the CBMW.<sup>14</sup> Conservative evangelical publications have increased in number considerably since the early 1990s, which is also indicated by the fact that the biannual *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* has been online since August 1995. Yet serious complementarian writings appeared already in the early 1980s, when American feminist scholarship became increasingly accepted in scholarly organizations such as the Society of Biblical Literature.<sup>15</sup> In hindsight, it is disquieting that the Christian Right was building its theological foundation at the same time when American feminism became increasingly visible in academia and religion. Certainly this visibility has diminished since the 1990s, as the conservative Christian agenda has begun to dominate American culture, religion, and politics. Slowly but surely, literature produced by complementarians has provided the intellectual and theological support for this change.<sup>16</sup>

Several writers stand out in the burgeoning literature, as their work provides insight into major convictions held by traditionalist Christians.<sup>17</sup> One of

<sup>14</sup> For a female writer, see, for example, Carolyn Mahaney, *Feminine Appeal: Seven Virtues of a Godly Wife and Mother* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003). Mahaney is the wife of C. J. Mahaney, who is a CBMW council member. The literature surveyed for this review essay examines books by white male evangelicals because publications from black male evangelicals did not turn up in my literature searches. Another article is needed to explore the position of black male evangelicals on gender and the Bible.

<sup>15</sup> See the complementarian publication by James B. Hurley *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1981). It is remarkable that during the same time period some of the earliest and most influential works of American feminist biblical scholarship were published. See, for example, Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978); and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

<sup>16</sup> The mainstream publishing world has been taken by surprise by the grassroots success of evangelical Christian literature. An example is the best-selling success of the Left Behind series, written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins and published by Tyndale House Publishers (Wheaton, IL), based on the book of Revelation. Volume 1, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days*, was published in 1995, and the twelfth volume, *Glorious Appearing: The End of Days*, in 2004. The series has sold 40 million copies, rivaling the Harry Potter series, according to the *New York Times*; see David D. Kirkpatrick, "Best-Selling Series Reaches Climax: Jesus' Return," *New York Times*, March 29, 2004. The opposition of the Christian Right to the 2003 novel *The Da Vinci Code*, by Dan Brown (New York: Doubleday), promises another frenzy for evangelical publishers; see Laurie Goodstein, "Defenders of Christianity Rush to Debunk 'The Da Vinci Code,'" *New York Times*, April 27, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> The following authors' backgrounds are based on information provided in the mentioned books and on the Web site of the CBMW.

them is Wayne A. Grudem, who is a research professor of Bible and theology at Phoenix Seminary, in Scottsdale, Arizona. A member of the CBMW Board of Directors, he is the editor of *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood*, coauthor of *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God's Words*, and coauthor, with John Piper, of *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*.<sup>18</sup> Another influential author is Jack Cottrell, a professor of theology at Cincinnati Bible College and Seminary, in Cincinnati, Ohio. He, too, is a CBMW member and wrote *Gender Roles and the Bible: Creation, the Fall, and Redemption*.<sup>19</sup> John Piper is yet another well-known writer of the complementarian position. He is the pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and also a CBMW member. He has published several books on pastoral issues in general, but his volume entitled *What's the Difference? Manhood and Womanhood Defined according to the Bible* discusses the biblical gender debate from a traditionalist perspective.<sup>20</sup> Also, Richard Hove, a staff member of Campus Crusade for Christ at Duke University, in Durham, North Carolina, affiliates with the CBMW. He authored a small volume entitled *Equality in Christ? Galatians 3:28 and the Gender Dispute*, which presents a complementarian interpretation of this important Christian Testament verse.<sup>21</sup> Another traditionalist theologian is D. A. Carson, who is research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, in Deerfield, Illinois. He wrote many books on various topics, but the one of most intense interest is *The Inclusive Language Debate: A Plea for Realism*.<sup>22</sup> These and several other books articulate the five major characteristics of the traditionalist position, which I outline here.

### *Sincere Commitment to the Bible*

A central feature of traditionalist writings is the sincere commitment with which all authors relate their Bible readings to contemporary gender practices

<sup>18</sup> Wayne A. Grudem, ed., *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002); Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*; Piper and Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*. Another coauthored volume focuses on pastoral rather than exegetical issues: Wayne A. Grudem and Dennis Rainey, eds., *Pastoral Leadership for Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002). Grudem's newest publication is *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More than 100 Disputed Questions* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> See n. 6.

<sup>20</sup> John Piper, *What's the Difference? Manhood and Womanhood Defined according to the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990).

<sup>21</sup> Richard Hove, *Equality in Christ? Galatians 3:28 and the Gender Dispute* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999).

<sup>22</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Inclusive Language Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998). Another complementarian book on translation issues is Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?*

in American church and society. They consider a discussion of biblical gender views not merely an academic exercise but a matter directly related to today's societal and ecclesiastical life. To them, the Bible connects to our world because the Bible is the single and most authoritative guide for evangelical Christian faith. Accordingly, complementarians claim to present *biblical*, and not their personal or scholarly, views on gender. The title of an essay by John Piper reflects the evangelical deference to the Bible: "A Vision of Biblical Complementarity: Manhood and Womanhood Defined according to the Bible."<sup>23</sup> The Bible is the foundation for traditionalists because they believe that we can relate biblical teachings to our society only after we have listened to the Bible.

Complementarians assert repeatedly that biblical teachings help readers understand "God's good design" of "God-given" gender identities.<sup>24</sup> Alexander Strauch explains: "I emphasize the Scriptures because the answer to this debate [about gender] is found in God's Word, not in books of sociology or anthropology. . . . It is essential that Christians hear clearly the voice of God through the Word of God in order to counteract secular society's pervasive influence."<sup>25</sup> To traditionalists, then, the Bible supersedes contemporary convictions and customs, because, as Jack Cottrell claims, the Bible is "the inspired and inerrant Word of God and . . . the final authority on all matters."<sup>26</sup> It is crucial to reconcile the sacred text with a culture that is not Bible-centered and increasingly diverse in terms of religious, cultural, and gender practices.

The struggle of fundamentalist Christianity with modern life is not new; it is more than a century old. What is new is the attack on contemporary gender practices.<sup>27</sup> Fundamentalists oppose the "gender revolution" that began in the 1960s, which traditionalists view as "a radical departure from biblical, apostolic Christianity." As a result, Christians should not endorse the "gender trouble" of our time.<sup>28</sup> Reading the Bible with this conviction in mind, traditionalists try to define gender through the lens of the divinely created order and speak of biblical "manhood" and "womanhood." Complementarians Vern S. Poythress and Wayne A. Grudem thus exclaim, "What is the fuss about? The Bible is God's own Word to us."<sup>29</sup> The Bible is the proclaimed authority, there to re-

<sup>23</sup> John Piper, "A Vision of Biblical Complementarity: Manhood and Womanhood Defined according to the Bible," in Piper and Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 31–59.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>25</sup> Alexander Strauch, *Men and Women, Equal yet Different: A Brief Study of the Biblical Passages on Gender* (Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth, 1999), 3–4.

<sup>26</sup> Cottrell, *Gender Roles and the Bible*, 21.

<sup>27</sup> The Roman Catholic Church officially shares this position; see "On the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and the World," available online in English at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20040731\\_collaboration\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040731_collaboration_en.html) (accessed January 9, 2005).

<sup>28</sup> Strauch, *Men and Women*, 3.

<sup>29</sup> Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 1.

mind everybody, especially fellow evangelicals, about women's and men's roles in our world.

*Support for Patriarchal Gender Roles*

Another important notion of the complementarian position is that women and men are created equally before God but with different social and ecclesiastical roles. This conviction, stated repetitively and consistently, is perhaps most clearly articulated by Alexander Strauch.<sup>30</sup> In accessible language, Strauch elaborates on the complementarian notion of "equal but different": Today's women and men have the task to "recover" what was lost after the Fall described in Genesis 3. Before the Fall, there was "sinless man, full of love, in his tender, strong leadership in relation to woman; and sinless woman, full of love, in her joyful, responsive support for man's leadership."<sup>31</sup> Given that humans are not sinless anymore, evangelicals are asked to develop "mature" manhood and womanhood. This state can be reached "when a husband leads like Christ and a wife responds like the bride of Christ." In other words, a mature husband is called to "biblical headship," which makes him take "primary responsibility for leadership and teaching in the church," and a mature wife is called to "biblical submission" to her husband.<sup>32</sup>

John Piper explains the same idea in this way: "At the heart of mature masculinity is a sense of benevolent responsibility to lead, provide for and protect women in ways appropriate to a man's differing relationships" and "At the heart of mature femininity is a freeing disposition to affirm, receive and nurture strength and leadership from worthy men in ways appropriate to a woman's differing relationships."<sup>33</sup> Men lead and protect women, whereas women support and submit to male leadership. Biblical passages such as Genesis 1:27, 2:18–24; Proverbs 31; Ephesians 5:21–33; Colossians 3:18–19; Titus 2:5; and 1 Peter 3:1–7 are usually quoted to endorse the notion of "equal but different." In short, this argument affirms the patriarchal status quo and is also the basis for the complementarian view on marriage, which emphasizes the heterosexual formation of the biblical creation story. The Genesis account depicts "the pattern for sexual relationship" as female and male. Consequently, only women and men are to marry, and gay marriage is abhorrent.<sup>34</sup>

At the heart of the argument is the complementarian insistence that women are not to serve as ecclesiastical leaders. Equal before God, women are to mature into their roles of womanhood and men into theirs of manhood.

<sup>30</sup> Strauch, *Men and Women*. See also Piper's *What's the Difference?*

<sup>31</sup> Strauch, *Men and Women*, 65.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 66, 67.

<sup>33</sup> Piper, "Vision of Biblical Complementarity," 35–36.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals*, 131–33.

Hence, traditionalists reject the legitimacy of women's ordained ministry. Piper and Grudem admit to this view frankly and readily: "We are persuaded that the Bible teaches that only men should be pastors and elders. That is, men should bear *primary* responsibility for Christlike leadership and teaching in the church. So it is unbiblical, we believe, and therefore detrimental, for women to assume this role."<sup>35</sup> Piper and Grudem argue in great detail that the Bible affirms traditional gender roles for women and men. Men are the leaders of both the church and their wives, and women should support and submit to their husbands.

Complementarians are proponents of a version of Christian teachings on gender that is, of course, not new. It has dominated church life and Western societies ever since Christianity became a state-empowered religion, in the fourth century. It is the foundation of patriarchal theology, which mainstream feminist theologies have exposed for its implications in gender discrimination and oppression. Strauch does not acknowledge any of these theological developments but simply contends, "The vast majority of women will rejoice over the leadership of [deeply spiritual] men and enter into a joyful partnership that upholds and honors the beautiful Biblical pattern of mature manhood and mature womanhood."<sup>36</sup>

It is disconcerting that publications such as Piper and Grudem's rely on the same biblical texts that mainstream feminist scholars interpreted in past decades, yet feminist work is absent in traditionalist writing. It is as if evangelical discussions took place in complete isolation from mainstream and progressive scholarly discourse, even though both cover the same territory—the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Testament. Traditionalists read biblical texts as if textual meaning were not contested and exegetical alternatives did not exist in the field of biblical studies.

#### *Failure to Engage Mainstream Scholarship*

The absence of mainstream scholarship in complementarian publications is disturbing, given that several writers are seminary professors. For instance, according to Piper and Grudem's anthology *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, George Knight III is professor of New Testament at Knox Theological Seminary, in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and received a ThM from Westminster Theological Seminary, in Glenside, Pennsylvania, and a ThD from Free University, in Amsterdam, Netherlands.<sup>37</sup> Yet his article, "Husbands and

<sup>35</sup> John Piper and Wayne A. Grudem, "An Overview of Central Concerns: Questions and Answers," in Piper and Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 60–61 (emphasis added).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>37</sup> Piper and Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ix–xi. Each of the essays discussed in the following section appears in this book.

Wives as Analogues of Christ and the Church: Ephesians 5:21–33 and Colossians 3:18–19,” includes only a few references to biblical scholarship in the footnotes.<sup>38</sup> Douglas Moo, who contributed the essay “What Does It Mean Not to Teach or Have Authority over Men? 1 Timothy 2:11–15,” is associate professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, in Deerfield, Illinois, and received his PhD from the University of St. Andrews, in Scotland.<sup>39</sup> His essay, too, does not engage sufficiently mainstream biblical research. Raymond Ortlund Jr.’s essay, “Male-Female Equality and Male Headship: Genesis 1–3,” refers to mainstream scholarly resources in only four footnotes.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the essay does not mention historical-critical research on Jesus, a deplorable omission for a writer who received a doctorate from the University of Aberdeen, in Scotland.<sup>41</sup> Biblical interpretations are based on a literalist hermeneutics that is primarily concerned with “real-life” consequences of biblical teachings. The traditionalist debate seems to take place solely in the narrow confines of the Christian Right, lacking any conversation with mainstream scholarship. Unsurprisingly, the result is a socially and politically conservative vision about women’s and men’s roles in church and society.

### *The Challenge of Evangelical Feminism*

Most traditionalists began writing on the Bible and gender because evangelical feminism challenged the secondary role of women in evangelical church life. Because these feminists accept the Christian Right’s assumption of “the Bible as the final authority in matters of faith and practice,” traditionalists felt provoked to respond. Jack Cottrell acknowledges this dynamic in his writing. In 1992 he published *Feminism and the Bible: An Introduction to Feminism for Christians*, in which he recognizes only “Biblical feminism” as a contender in evangelical theology.<sup>42</sup> His book also describes other kinds of secular and

<sup>38</sup> George W. Knight III, chap. 8, “Husbands and Wives as Analogues of Christ and the Church: Ephesians 5:21–33 and Colossians 3:18–19,” 165–78.

<sup>39</sup> Douglas Moo, chap. 9, “What Does It Mean Not to Teach or Have Authority over Men? 1 Timothy 2:11–15,” 179–93.

<sup>40</sup> Raymond Ortlund Jr., chap. 3, “Male-Female Equality and Male Headship: Genesis 1–3,” 95–112.

<sup>41</sup> The other academic contributors to *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* have taught at the following institutions of higher learning, according to the biographical information in the book: Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (Wayne A. Grudem, D. A. Carson), Dallas Baptist University (David J. Ayers), Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary (James A. Borland), Westminster Theological Seminary (John M. Frame, Vern Sheridan Poythress), Western Baptist College (H. Wayne House), Bethel College (Gregg Johnson), Knox Theological Seminary (George W. Knight III.), Criswell College (Dorothy Patterson, L. Paige Patterson), University of South Carolina School of Medicine (George A. Rekers), Bethel Theological Seminary (Thomas R. Schreiner), and Concordia Theological Seminary (William C. Winrich).

<sup>42</sup> Cottrell, *Feminism and the Bible*, 240.

Christian feminism, but it does not mention feminist thought of other religious traditions, and his descriptions exhibit considerable bias and lack of depth.<sup>43</sup> Cottrell is also oblivious to the feminist insight that gender discourse has to take into consideration social categories such as race and class. Still, Cottrell's book illustrates well the traditionalist defense of the evangelical status quo against evangelical feminist claims.

Some traditionalists acknowledge the discrimination of women in past and present society because of Jesus's call for "equal but different" gender roles. Strauch declares the following:

No one who truly loves people, is sensitive to the Word of God, and is keenly aware of the unspeakable dehumanization that women have suffered (and still suffer) would want to discriminate against women. . . . To sin against women is to sin against God in whose image women are created. Why, then, would any intelligent, thinking, sensitive, Bible-believing Christian dare argue for role distinctions between men and women? The answer is simple: Jesus Christ taught that men and women are equal yet different.<sup>44</sup>

This complementarian writer opposes women's discrimination but does not relinquish the notion of "equal but different." Other complementarians are less considerate and even openly hostile to evangelical feminism. Poythress and Grudem pronounce, "But the grip of feminist dogma on the modern psyche confronts us with a particular danger. Feminism attempts systematically to ban from the language patterns of thought that would be contrary to its program. . . . The integrity of the Word of God has been compromised in the process."<sup>45</sup> These authors reject feminist efforts toward inclusive language and socioecclesiastical equality. Women are to be submissive to men, as prescribed by their reading of the Bible.

#### *Attachment to Gender Essentialism*

Traditionalists also take for granted essentialist gender notions that are based on heterosexism and the duality of female and male. In fact, they repeat monotonously that women and men are created equally before God (Gen. 1:27). They also insist on the first woman's greater vulnerability to sinful behavior than the first man's (Gen. 3). They affirm the "headship" of the first man over the first woman—reinforced after the Fall but already present in the cre-

<sup>43</sup> Cottrell categorizes feminism as "secular," "goddess," or "liberal Christian." For a condensed description, see Cottrell, *Gender Roles and the Bible*.

<sup>44</sup> Strauch, *Men and Women*, 9.

<sup>45</sup> Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, 298.

ated order before the Fall (Gen. 2). Lastly, they acknowledge women's and men's different roles in society and church (e.g., Gal. 3:28; 1 Peter 3:1–7).<sup>46</sup>

Jack Cottrell follows this pattern when he maintains, "There is *nothing* in the teaching about creation and the Fall, *nothing* in the ministry and teaching of Jesus, and *nothing* in Galatians 3:28 that justifies the teaching of egalitarianism with regard to gender roles." To Cottrell, the Bible teaches what he calls the "male leadership view," or the "headship-submission pattern," a patriarchal ordering of society based on the biblical text.<sup>47</sup> The complementarian rejection of inclusive Bible translations follows the same logic that aims for "biblical fidelity."<sup>48</sup> Contemporary gender roles for women and men have to adapt to the biblical vision, which is based on the text itself and assumes gender roles as a biological given for female and male.

### The Egalitarian Position

Like the complementarians, egalitarians claim biblical authority because they feel solidly anchored in the evangelical belief of an inerrant Bible. Yet, in contrast to complementarians, who began articulating their position in the 1980s and most prolifically beginning in the 1990s, egalitarians began publishing as far back as the early 1970s. One of the first books written from an egalitarian position is *All We're Meant to Be: A Biblical Approach to Women's Liberation* (1974) by Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty.<sup>49</sup> This was followed by Paul Jewett's *Man as Male and Female: A Study in Sexual Relationships from a Theological Point of View* (1975) and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott's *Women, Men, and the Bible* (1977).<sup>50</sup> Preceding the traditionalist position, egalitarians have criticized patriarchal and gender-discriminatory practices in evangelical churches.<sup>51</sup> They have defended women's equality in all aspects of life. Yet in

<sup>46</sup> For a detailed complementarian interpretation of Gal. 3:28, see Hove, *Equality in Christ?*

<sup>47</sup> Cottrell, *Gender Roles and the Bible*, 303 (emphases added).

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Carson, *Inclusive Language Debate*, 21; and Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* For an almost encyclopedic discussion regarding issues related to translating the Bible into English, see Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*.

<sup>49</sup> Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be: A Biblical Approach to Women's Liberation* (Waco, TX: Word, 1974). The complementarians Piper and Grudem present a list of early egalitarian authors in their preface to *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, xiii. The text of this preface is also available at <http://www.leaderu.com/orgs/cbmw/rbmw/preface.html> (accessed January 9, 2005).

<sup>50</sup> Paul Jewett, *Man as Male and Female: A Study in Sexual Relationships from a Theological Point of View* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975); Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Women, Men, and the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1977).

<sup>51</sup> This dynamic is acknowledged in the history of the organization Christians for Biblical Equality; see [http://www.cbeinternational.org/new/about/who\\_we\\_are.shtml](http://www.cbeinternational.org/new/about/who_we_are.shtml) (accessed January 9, 2005).

the past three decades egalitarians have not had much success, because the great majority of evangelical churches do not ordain women as ministers and pastors.<sup>52</sup>

Egalitarians, too, founded organizations in support of their agenda. A well-known group is Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE). Founded in 1987, CBE is a nonprofit organization with members from more than eighty denominations. The organization endorses the notion that “the Bible, properly interpreted, teaches the fundamental equality of men and women of all racial and ethnic groups and all economic classes, based on the teachings of scripture as reflected in Galatians 3:28.” CBE organizes national conferences, gives the Priscilla and Aquila Award (honoring “those who have ‘risked their necks’ for the sake of biblical equality”), and publishes the journal *Priscilla Papers*.<sup>53</sup> CBE is also marketing- and computer-savvy, offering books, articles, audiotapes, and videotapes for sale and for free. CBE upholds three “core values,” namely, that “the Bible teaches the equality of women and men, God has given each person gifts to be used for the good of Christ’s Kingdom, and Christians are to develop and exercise their God-given gifts in home, church, and society.” Moreover, the mission statement maintains, “CBE equips believers by affirming the biblical truth of equality. Thus all believers, without regard to gender, race, and class are free and encouraged to use their God-given gifts in families, ministries, and communities.”<sup>54</sup>

In other words, CBE upholds equality as its most important principle regardless of a person’s gender, race, or class. Other organizations, many of them online, endorse this position and acknowledge their affiliation with CBE. Two are designed as online forums and communication providers: Gender Justice and Churches of Christ; and the Egalitarian Christian Alliance, which under-

<sup>52</sup> The Assemblies of God, a nondenominational church in the evangelical tradition, allows the ordination of women; see art. 7, sec. 2, par. k of the Bylaws of the General Council of the Assemblies of God, at [http://ag.org/top/about/bylaws\\_06\\_07.cfm#BasicQualifications](http://ag.org/top/about/bylaws_06_07.cfm#BasicQualifications) (accessed January 9, 2005): “The Scriptures plainly teach that divinely called and qualified women may also serve the church in the ministry of the Word (Joel 2:29; Acts 21:9; 1 Corinthians 11:5). Women who meet the qualifications for ministerial credentials are eligible for whatever grade of credentials their qualifications warrant and have the right to administer the ordinances of the church and are eligible to serve in all levels of church ministry, and/or district and General Council leadership.” In practice, however, there are few ordained women in the Assemblies of God. According to information provided on its Web site, the church has only 1,598 female ordained ministers but 17,230 male ordained ministers. Based on the calendar year 2003, the executive leadership team does not include a single woman; see <http://ag.org/top/about/statistics.cfm>.

<sup>53</sup> See [http://www.cbeinternational.org/new/about/about\\_cbe.shtml](http://www.cbeinternational.org/new/about/about_cbe.shtml) (accessed January 9, 2005). A conference of the theme “Men, Women, and the Church: A Biblical Approach to Relationships” took place in Durham, England, September 3–5, 2004. One of the keynote speakers was the Christian Testament writer N. T. Wright, who is renowned for his historical-Jesus reconstructions.

<sup>54</sup> See [http://www.cbeinternational.org/new/about/who\\_we\\_are.shtml](http://www.cbeinternational.org/new/about/who_we_are.shtml) (accessed January 9, 2005).

stands itself as a support network and acknowledges its close affiliation with CBE.<sup>55</sup> Like the traditionalists, egalitarians enjoy a solid and growing network of like-minded evangelicals.

Women and some men endorse the egalitarian position. One woman is Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, a freelance writer and speaker who has written passionately on the subject. Arguing for the social and ecclesiastical equality of women, Groothuis refers to the same texts that traditionalists quote (e.g., Gen. 1:27, 2–3; Gal. 3:28; 1 Tim. 2:12). Yet she rejects the traditionalist distinction between “essential” equality and “functional” difference between female and male in this passage:

Traditionalists affirm women’s equality with men, but it seems that by it they mean only equal human worth; that is, the truth that all human beings . . . are equal in human value before God. . . . But the question at stake in this debate does not pertain merely to how God views people, but to how people should treat other people. It won’t do simply to assert that we must value women equally because they are equal in God’s eyes. We must be more specific: Given that women and men stand on equal ground before God, is it biblically warranted for men to claim exclusive access to higher-status positions solely on the basis of their gender? What are the ethical, social, and theological implications that follow from our basic human equality of worth before God?<sup>56</sup>

Groothuis shows the insufficiency of the complementarian position and demands to relate theological equality to human life on earth. Christian ethics needs to be connected to Christian theology, because equality before God makes Christians equals in society. This argument is not new in Christian theological history, and Groothuis supports it with many quotations and references, including some from nineteenth-century American Christian feminists.<sup>57</sup>

And so Groothuis argues back and forth with the traditionalist position, especially in the second part of her book *Good News for Women*, in which she “assess[es] the traditionalist Proof Text.”<sup>58</sup> The five chapters in the second section deal with complementarian interpretations of the standard biblical texts opposing the notion of “equal but different.” Groothuis’s chapter titles say it all: “In the Beginning,” “The Husband Is the Head of the Wife,” “Marriage and

<sup>55</sup> The Web site of Gender Justice and Churches of Christ is at <http://www.gal328.org/>. The Web site of the Egalitarian Christian Alliance is at <http://www.equalitycentral.com/>. Yet another organization, which originated from the Evangelicals for Social Action in 1974, is the Evangelical and Ecumenical Women’s Caucus, which maintains a Web site at <http://www.eewc.com/>.

<sup>56</sup> Groothuis, *Good News for Women*, 45–46.

<sup>57</sup> See especially the chapters “Evangelicalism and the Rise of American Feminism” (31–48) and “Feminism: A Two-Century Tradition” (49–64) in Groothuis, *Women Caught in the Conflict*.

<sup>58</sup> Groothuis, *Good News for Women*, 119.

Mutual Submission,” “The Bible and Women in Leadership,” and “‘I Do Not Permit a Woman.’” From the book of Genesis to the apostle Paul, Groothuis disputes traditionalism and upholds women’s equality in society and church.

Groothuis is not alone in her egalitarian efforts, even though the “non-hierarchical, flexible, equalitarian approach” is sometimes called the “slippery slope” view and does not enjoy the general support of evangelical Christians.<sup>59</sup> In a book published in 2001, William J. Webb takes seriously the egalitarian argument. His position is not unambiguously egalitarian, because he sympathizes with traditionalists. He makes a case for what he calls a “complementary egalitarian” view and aims for a “redemptive-movement hermeneutics” that would bridge the divide between egalitarians and hierarchicalists.<sup>60</sup> Taking a middle ground, he makes a case “for role distinction based upon biological differences between men and women” (241). He considers his position to be a form of egalitarianism, because he does not put biological differences on an equal footing with psychological or social ones. Although he believes, for instance, that women are biologically better prepared for early child rearing, he does not reject social equality for women on the basis of biology. Women and men are biologically different, but these differences do not necessarily call for social inequality (241). Accordingly, he rejects the traditionalist position, “the kind of patriarchy found in current Biblical Manhood and Womanhood publications,” when he offers this compromise: “An equal power differential could be developed in the home and church (i.e., not restricting women in the decision-making process or from offices based solely upon gender), while at the same time granting men a certain level of *symbolic* honor for their firstborn status within the human family” (243; emphasis added).

To ground his proposition in the authority of the Bible, Webb reads biblical texts with a “hermeneutic of cultural analysis.” This approach allows him to differentiate in biblical texts those elements that are “culturally bound” and those that are “transcultural.” The former are specific to the time in which the Bible was written, not demanding evangelical readers’ acceptance for their lives today. The latter are valid beyond the confines of time and place and require evangelical commitment. The challenge is, of course, how to decide which is which. For this purpose he examines biblical texts related to “slaves, women, and homosexuals,” explaining, “Our quest, then, is to determine whether the church should move with our culture or against our culture. . . . We need to ask the question, Which components within Scripture are cultural

<sup>59</sup> See *ibid.*, 239. For other egalitarian writings, see Groothuis’s bibliography on 263–66; also see *Priscilla Papers*, at <http://www.equalitydepot.com/index.asp?PageAction=VIEWCATS&Category=17>, and the annotated bibliographies of the *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*.

<sup>60</sup> Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals*, 241–44. Further references to this source appear parenthetically in the text.

and which are transcultural?” (29). Webb’s proposal is unusual, because he suggests going beyond a literal reading of the Bible: “We do not want to stay static with the text” but “need to move on, beyond the text” (33). In evangelical circles this is a radical idea.

Webb’s consistent implementation of this “cultural analysis” turns out to be problematic. In intriguing but ultimately obfuscating charts and explanations, the book comes to predictable results: Webb rejects the biblical tolerance for slavery, accepts some aspects of biblical inequality for women, and condemns homosexuality. His hermeneutical movement from “original culture (ancient Near Eastern and/or Greco-Roman culture)” to “Bible (the isolated words of the text; an ethic ‘frozen in time’),” to “our culture (where it reflects a better ethic than [the Bible]),” and to “ultimate ethic (reflected in the spirit of the biblical text)” aims beyond literal meaning, but it is unable to convincingly determine the “spirit” of the biblical text.<sup>61</sup> Pedantic and painstaking examinations of biblical texts on slavery, women, and homosexuality shape the content of a book that is also difficult to read.

What is remarkable about Webb’s argument, however, is his persistent effort to reconcile the traditionalist with the egalitarian position within a broader framework of interpretation. For instance, Webb recognizes Galatians 3:28 as a central text for both the egalitarians and the complementarians. Yet their interpretations, Webb observes, have turned stale, because they do not interpret this verse within the larger context of Paul’s argument. For Paul, the larger issue is how followers of Christ should live together. Webb offers a solution when he suggests considering Galatians 3:28 part of Paul’s argument about the development of Christian community, the “new creation in Christ” (147–48). This issue is “transcultural” and needs the attention of both traditionalists and egalitarians. Moving beyond a narrow textual focus, they should ask, “Where are these new-creation patterns taking us?” (149). The debate, Webb hopes, would diffuse the polarized stalemate between egalitarians and complementarians. Unfortunately, Webb’s study requires a good deal of commitment to detailed and convoluted argumentation, and it is doubtful that his middle position will persuade either group to participate in the suggested process. Still, the book is unusual for its criticism of literalist Bible readings, one of the main theological premises of the Christian Right.

### Moderate Evangelicals

Some authors do not explicitly affiliate with either the complementarian or the egalitarian position, although they endorse politically and religiously con-

<sup>61</sup> See especially *ibid.*, 32, 37, 38, and 40, for illustrative graphs on this “redemptive-movement hermeneutic.”

servative organizations and promote an evangelical perspective. One of them is John W. Miller, professor emeritus of religious studies at Conrad Grebel College, in Ontario, Canada. Miller argues in a publication entitled *Calling God "Father": Essays on the Bible, Fatherhood, and Culture* that the feminist critique of male imagery for God, which feminists coined "biblical patriarchy," has led to "fatherless families headed by mothers alone."<sup>62</sup> The lack of viewing God as masculine, as father, has contributed to North American societies' experiencing "an inevitable drift," because "depatriarchalized" theologies do not validate fathering as a "predominately cultural achievement" (4).

Miller's book consists of a series of essays, some published during the 1980s, that describe the position of fathers in the ancient Near East and in ancient Israel, criticize feminist writings on "depatriarchalizing" the Bible, and relate the "biblical tradition of fathering" to "our contemporary fatherhood crisis" (6). The book aims to recover male language for the divinity in a time in which, Miller argues, the church has succumbed to feminist demands. According to Miller, only male God-talk provides the sociotheological parameters guiding men to take responsibility as fathers, a dynamic that is not necessary for women because "an adult female will be naturally transformed into a social mother when she bears a child" (9). For men, a cultural-theological process is essential to becoming involved in the work of child raising. Otherwise, "powerful natural forces take over in favor of the mother-alone family" (11).

Miller's position is, of course, an inherently antifeminist one. In fact, he mentions favorably several organizations of the Christian Right, such as Focus on the Family, the Promise Keepers, the National Fatherhood Initiative, and the Institute for American Values (132).<sup>63</sup> Miller welcomes their efforts to nur-

<sup>62</sup> John W. Miller, *Calling God "Father": Essays on the Bible, Fatherhood, and Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Paulist, 1999), 4. Further references to this source appear parenthetically in the text. Miller taught at Conrad Grebel College, a Canadian Mennonite school that describes itself as "evangelical, ecumenical and Anabaptist-Mennonite in focus"; see <http://www.mhsc.ca/index.asp?content=http://www.mhsc.ca/encyclopedia/contents/C666-Bib.html#Additional%20Information>. Another publication in the category "moderate evangelicals" is David Blankenhorn, Don S. Browning, and Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, eds., *Does Christianity Teach Male Headship? The Equal-Regard Marriage and Its Critics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004). Of the three editors, Blankenhorn stands out for his conservative political agenda. He is founder and president of the Institute for American Values, a decidedly conservative platform for research and promotion of family and fatherhood (<http://www.americanvalues.org/>). According to Eerdmans Publishing Company's biographical note, Blankenhorn was appointed by President George H. W. Bush to serve on the National Commission on America's Urban Families; see [http://www.eerdmans.com/shop/contrib.asp?contrib\\_id=740](http://www.eerdmans.com/shop/contrib.asp?contrib_id=740) (accessed January 9, 2005). Publishing such an author seems to indicate that Eerdmans, a conservative yet mainstream publisher of biblical scholarship, is moving to the political and religious Christian Right. Paulist Press seems to be heading in a similar direction.

<sup>63</sup> All of these organizations endorse a politically and religiously conservative agenda. For further information, visit their Web sites: <http://www.family.org/>; <http://www.promisekeepers.org/>; <http://www.fatherhood.org/>; and <http://www.americanvalues.org/>.

ture “father-involved” families in Christian institutions. He even quotes Pope John Paul II, who called it original sin “to abolish fatherhood” (124). To Miller, all of these entities understand the dangers of a society that does not value the “domestication of man” into family life, given that “the father-involved family is a predominantly *cultural* (or spiritual) institution that protects us from dehumanization” (124; Miller’s emphasis). Consequently, feminist challenges to patriarchal theology and society have to be rejected. They threaten to move society to “increasingly unmanageable emotional and social disorders . . . the tragic pattern of decline and fall” (133).

What can be said about this outspoken hostility to women’s leadership and work in our world? Not only do fathers continue to play a major role in societal and familial life but, worse, Miller considers the feminist challenge to patriarchy to be the prime cause of the societal ills in North America. For sure, Miller’s insistence on the success of feminism is overrated; North American society is solidly in white male control. But what is perhaps more pernicious about Miller’s book is the wide audience it addresses. The book includes an introduction and an epilogue by renowned authors of the fatherhood movement, and its thesis about the loss of fatherhood responsibilities resonates in a culture that distrusts single mothers.<sup>64</sup> Predictably, Miller has nothing to say about male sexual violence and the decided lack of societal support for women who raise children on their own. Hence, this is a disturbing book. Predicting the decline of Western civilization due to women’s gains in the political, economic, religious, and social realms, it barely hides its politically and religiously conservative goals and connections.

Two other books belong in the category of moderate evangelicals. One was written by Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., a senior minister at First Presbyterian Church in Augusta, Georgia. The book, *God’s Unfaithful Wife: A Biblical Theology of Spiritual Adultery*, appears in a series edited by the complementarian D. A. Carson. It examines the biblical metaphor of marriage and harlotry and includes discussions on the books of Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.<sup>65</sup> In an appendix, Ortlund directly engages feminist interpretations. He charges that they confuse metaphor with reality, reduce a metaphor on divine-human relationship to male-female sexuality, and fail to recognize that the metaphor of the harlot describes “our rejection of [God’s] love for the love of others.”<sup>66</sup> He advises feminists to “be born again” because “each of us needs illumination through personal renewal by the Holy Spirit and it makes a

<sup>64</sup> The introduction is by David Blankenhorn (see n. 62), and the epilogue is by Eugene R. August. Both have published books on the loss and importance of fatherhood in America.

<sup>65</sup> Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., *God’s Unfaithful Wife: A Biblical Theology of Spiritual Adultery*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), especially 77–136.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

hermeneutical difference.”<sup>67</sup> Orthlund's is a theologically conservative position, even though he himself does not classify his position as such.

The same conservatism applies to a collection of essays entitled *This Is My Name Forever: The Trinity and Gender Language for God*, edited by Alvin F. Kimel Jr.<sup>68</sup> The contributing authors come from a variety of American Christian affiliations, including evangelical, mainline Protestant, and Roman Catholic. This book, too, holds feminist theological work accountable for the changed discourse about God in church and academia, and all of the contributors agree that masculine language for God is appropriate for Christian theology and liturgy. Directly engaging feminist work,<sup>69</sup> the authors reject feminist theological analysis as a form of modern theology that ends in “self-imagined liberations” and misses the “saving, reconciling, and liberating hope . . . of the triune God whom we invoke as Father, Son and Spirit.”<sup>70</sup>

### Sociologies of Biblical Readings: Concluding Comments

This selective literature review of the Christian Right's discourse demonstrates that we need much clarity on the sociologies of biblical readings. When evangelical readers present interpretations that assume an essentialist gender view and engage neither mainstream biblical scholarship nor feminist theories on gender, we need to be clear on the cultural, historical, political, and religious contexts of biblical interpretation. This concern is certainly not new, as, for instance, the earlier-mentioned essay by Esther Fuchs illustrates. Progressive feminist Bible scholarship benefits from being clear and deliberate in analyzing the social locations of biblical readings.

The Christian Right's discourse illustrates how important is an understanding of the sociologies of biblical readings. Sometimes the need for such understanding becomes particularly clear when it is *not* done. For instance, the recently published evangelical commentary *The IVP Women's Bible Commentary*, edited by Catherine Clark Kroeger and Mary Evans, was recently reviewed in the *Review of Biblical Literature*, a publication sponsored by the Society of Biblical Literature. The reviewer mentioned the “evangelical perspective” of the commentary but then stated that she appreciated “the grow-

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>68</sup> Alvin F. Kimel Jr., ed., *This Is My Name Forever: The Trinity and Gender Language for God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001).

<sup>69</sup> See chapters in *ibid.*, for example, Donald D. Hook and Alvin F. Kimel Jr., “The Pronouns of Deity: A Theolinguistic Critique of Feminist Proposals,” 62–87; R. R. Reno, “Feminist Theology as Modern Project,” 161–89; and Stanley J. Grenz, “Is God Sexual? Human Embodiment and the Christian Conception of God,” 191–212.

<sup>70</sup> Gary W. Deddo, introduction to Kimel, *This Is My Name Forever*, 22. See also Grenz, “Is God Sexual?” 236.

ing strength of academic work of women within the evangelical movement.” The reviewer also wrote that the volume “provides another voice of women, reminding all of us, but especially those who read the biblical text more critically, of the multivocal character of women’s voices.”<sup>71</sup> This comment minimizes the political, cultural, and religious contexts of this and comparable publications. Is it only an issue of “women” reading the Bible, or is it not more crucial to understand the political interests behind such readings? More analysis than that review provides is needed to illuminate the sociologies of evangelical interpretations, published both by women and men.

A similar issue is raised by another book. In spring 2004, Eerdmans Publishing Company reprinted Samuel Terrien’s *Till the Heart Sings: A Biblical Theology of Manhood and Womanhood*, which had appeared first in 1985.<sup>72</sup> The pressing question is, of course, why the book is published now, when the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood is most active and successful in disseminating publications that contain similar terminology. Is it possible that Terrien’s book will be read in support of evangelical conservative gender theories and practices? If not, why not? And what are the politics of a publisher that reprints this volume at this moment in time? Is it a coincidence, or is it a strategic move to align mainstream Bible scholarship with Christian conservatism? These are some of the questions that an inquiry into the sociologies of biblical readings urges us to raise.

In conclusion, this review illustrates the Christian Right’s theological, exegetical, and political conservatism regarding gender and the Bible. As we have seen, the evangelical argumentation quickly turns exegetically tiresome and theologically predictable. At the same time, however, evangelical books on gender and the Bible enjoy wide distribution and readership. They are part of the growing Christian conservative agenda worldwide, as recent struggles about gay ministry and leadership in the U.S. Episcopal and United Methodist churches have revealed. It is crucial for progressive feminist Bible scholars to be aware of these developments and to continue investigating these dynamics, because such work promises to illuminate not only the specifics of evangelical Bible readings but also the turn to the right in American and global politics, culture, and religion.

<sup>71</sup> Catherine Clark Kroeger and Mary J. Evans, eds., *The IVP Women’s Bible Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002). K. Jo Ann Badly’s review of the book appears in the *Review of Biblical Literature*, May 22, 2004, <http://www.bookreviews.org/bookdetail.asp?TitleId=1948&CodePage=1948> (accessed January 9, 2005).

<sup>72</sup> Samuel Terrien, *Till the Heart Sings: A Biblical Theology of Manhood and Womanhood* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004). In 1985, the book was first published by Fortress Press.