

PATRIARCHY AS AN EVIL THAT GOD TOLERATED:
ANALYSIS AND IMPLICATIONS
FOR THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

GUENTHER HAAS*

It is generally accepted by Christians of a wide range of theological and Biblical positions that the culture established in the OT prescribes a pattern of relations between men and women that is patriarchal. But there are different evaluations of this pattern—that is, different moral judgments made about the pattern and its place in the broader scheme of the history of redemption. The conclusions drawn are related to one's view of the Bible and of the Biblical teaching on the role of women.

My interest in this article is in analyzing the assumption that the patriarchal culture instituted in the OT is a moral evil, an evil that the coming of the fullness of redemption in Christ has abolished. While this view is held by the whole range of feminists, my paper focuses on evangelical feminism.¹ The reason for this is my desire to understand the implications of embracing this assumption for the authority of the Bible as the infallible Word of God. The key question: Does adopting this assumption undermine Scriptural authority, or can one adopt it and still retain an evangelical view of the infallibility of Scripture? The three specific areas where this question is dealt with are the impact of the assumption upon one's view of Scripture, the nature of God's revelation, and the unity of a Christian ethic.

Before we look at the Bible we need to understand the meaning of the term "patriarchy." Patriarchy can be defined in morally neutral terms as simply the rule of fathers: men over women, and husbands over wives and

* Gene Haas is assistant professor of religion and theology at Redeemer College, 777 Highway 53 East, Ancaster, Ontario L9K 1J4.

¹ I distinguish between two groups of feminists according to their view of the Bible. Evangelical feminists (or Biblical feminists) are those who hold to the authority of the Bible as the infallible Word of God. Mainline (or liberal) feminists are those who accept as authoritative those themes in the Bible that promote the full liberation of women (and all oppressed peoples) but who reject anything in the Bible as divine revelation that promotes patriarchy and other parallel forms of social oppression. Examples here are R. R. Ruether, L. M. Russell and P. Tribble. There is another group, frequently designated as radical feminists, who find patriarchy so extensive in the Bible that they reject the Bible or any part of it as the locus of revelation. Some within this category continue to view themselves as Christians, although they understand feminist experience in the struggle for liberation as the revelation of God's will and, thus, as the normative standard over Scripture. (Cf. e.g. E. S. Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* [Boston: Beacon, 1984] 13–14.) Others, having concluded that the Bible is irredeemably patriarchal, have turned their backs on the Bible and the God revealed therein. The most notable example here is M. Daly (*Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* [Boston: Beacon, 1973] 18 ff.).

children. But feminists do not see patriarchy as neutral, and their definitions reflect this. Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty equate patriarchy with sexism, "the systematic oppression of women," which they consider "one of the oldest expressions of original sin."² Mary Van Leeuwen and associates state:

Patriarchy as a male pyramid of graded subordination and exploitations specifies women's oppression in terms of the class, race, country, or religion of the men to whom they belong. . . . It points to the sociopolitical mechanisms creating and sustaining the oppression of women.

Intrinsic to patriarchy is androcentrism, male-centeredness, which "sees men as the bearers of authority, power and value to the relative or complete exclusion of women" and which sees women as "always defined in relation to men" but not vice versa.³ Anne Carr notes that the male is viewed as the norm who possesses all dignity, virtue and power, in contrast to the female who is inferior, defective, and less than fully human.⁴ This is justified by the ideology that depicts the male-female relationship as a dualism of superior-inferior.⁵ Gretchen Hull contends that patriarchy "fosters discrimination and abuses of human rights."⁶ Rosemary Ruether argues that patriarchy as the whole structure of father-ruled society reinforces not merely the subordination of females to males but also the oppression of all weak and marginalized groups to the rich and powerful.⁷ Thus patriarchy is understood as the major sin that lies at the root of all systems of oppression.

I. PATRIARCHY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

A wide range of Christian feminists acknowledge that the OT is thoroughly patriarchal. This is evident in post-Christian feminists, such as Mary Daly;⁸ in radical feminists, such as Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza;⁹ and in mainline feminists, such as Ruether,¹⁰ Letty M. Russell¹¹ and Phyllis Trible.¹² This is also the case for evangelical feminists and egali-

² L. D. Scanzoni and N. A. Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be: Biblical Feminism for Today* (3d rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 1.

³ *After Eden: Facing the Challenge of Gender Reconciliation* (ed. M. S. Van Leeuwen; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Carlisle: Paternoster, 1993) 121.

⁴ A. E. Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (San Francisco: Harper, 1988) 136-137.

⁵ See R. R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983) 165.

⁶ G. G. Hull, *Equal to Serve: Women and Men Working Together Revealing the Gospel* (Tarrytown: Revell, 1987) 97.

⁷ Ruether, *Sexism* 61.

⁸ See M. Daly, "After the Death of God the Father: Women's Liberation and the Transformation of Christian Consciousness," *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (ed. C. P. Christ and J. Plaskow; San Francisco: Harper, 1979) 54-57.

⁹ Fiorenza, *Bread* 15 ff.

¹⁰ Ruether, *Sexism* 53-54.

¹¹ See L. Russell, *The Liberating Word: A Guide to Non-Sexist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 15 ff.

¹² P. Trible, "Feminist Hermeneutics and Bible Studies," *Feminist Theology: A Reader* (ed. A. Lodes; London: SPCK/Louisville: Westminster/John Knox) 23.

tarians, such as Scanzoni and Hardesty,¹³ Virginia R. Mollenkott,¹⁴ Paul Jewett,¹⁵ Mary J. Evans,¹⁶ Ruth A. Tucker¹⁷ and Gilbert Bilezikian.¹⁸

The patriarchal character of the OT pervades its instructions on Israel's religious and social life. The tribes and clans were designated by the male founders, and one's place in them was reckoned by a patriarchal lineage. Within the family the husband and father had the responsibility of leadership, and he had the final authority in making the decisions (e.g. Exod 21:3, 22). The husband's authority over his wife was expressed in his title as lord (*ʿādôn*, Judg 19:26–27; *baʿal*, Exod 21:3, 22), which she used to show her respect for him.

Since marriage and producing offspring, especially male heirs, were major goals for both sexes, girls were expected to marry and raise children. Normally it was the wife who was in charge of the home and its affairs. Her life centered upon the bearing and raising of children.¹⁹ As such she functioned as a subordinate authority under her husband (cf. Numbers 31).

The control of marriages and offspring was also patriarchal. A woman's father decided whom she could marry (Exod 22:17), although there is evidence that daughters were consulted (cf. Gen 24:55–58).²⁰ The levirate laws maintained the name of the deceased man through his male heirs. If a man died without a son, his brother had to take the widow as a wife to produce a male heir for his deceased brother (Deut 25:5–6). If a deceased man had no sons, his daughters could receive his inheritance only if they married men from within their own tribe (Num 36:1–9). The OT mentions divorce (incidentally in Deut 24:1–4) as something a man could initiate, but nowhere does it grant women the right to initiate it.²¹ A woman's vows and legal agreements were valid only if her husband, or her father if she were a young woman still living in her father's house, did not veto them (Numbers 30).²²

¹³ Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be* 12.

¹⁴ V. R. Mollenkott, *Women, Men and the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977) 91.

¹⁵ P. K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 129.

¹⁶ M. J. Evans, *Women in the Bible* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1983) 25–26.

¹⁷ R. A. Tucker, *Women in the Maze: Questions and Answers on Biblical Equality* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992) 58.

¹⁸ G. Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985) 63 ff.

¹⁹ J. B. Hurley points out that in passages such as Ruth 4 and Proverbs 31 there is evidence that women had greater freedom in the social realm, functioning as commercial peers with men and even directing them as servants (*Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981] 43–44, 56).

²⁰ Bilezikian is wrong when he says that Exod 21:7 allowed a man to sell his daughter as a concubine servant (*Beyond* 63). Leviticus 19:29; 21:9 specifically condemned causing one's daughter to become a prostitute.

²¹ Bilezikian claims that there is a double standard for men and women when it comes to divorce (Deut 24:1–4), sexual promiscuity (22:13–30) and trial by ordeal (Num 5:11–31) (*Beyond* 64–67). Others argue that there is no unequal treatment (cf. Hurley, *Man* 38–42) and that these practices embody protective measures in the treatment of women (cf. S. E. McClelland, "The New Reality in Christ: Perspectives from Biblical Studies," *Gender Matters: Women's Studies for the Christian Community* [ed. J. S. Hagen; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990] 59–60).

²² Numbers 30:9 does state that a vow or obligation taken by a widow or divorced woman is binding on her.

Civil rule of the Israelite nation was accomplished by elders, judges, prophets and kings. These were usually men, with some notable exceptions: the prophetess Miriam, sister of Moses (Exodus 15); the prophetess and judge Deborah (Judg 4:4–6); and the prophetess Huldah (2 Kgs 22:11–13). No female monarchs are mentioned except Athaliah, the usurper queen (11:3).

The religious life of the nation involved both men and women, although men had requirements laid on them as heads of families. Men brought the sacrifices that their families ate together (1 Sam 1:4–5). Men, but not women, were required to go to the three great feasts of the year, at which they represented their families (Exod 23:17; Deut 16:16–17). In contrast to the nations around Israel, the office of priest was restricted to men (Exodus 28–29). This office included within its duties both the offering of sacrifices and the authorized exposition of the law.

The question that arises for Christians who hold to the intrinsic evil of patriarchy is what to do with this patriarchal Bible.²³ Some who hold the two assumptions—that the OT writers simply incorporate the patriarchal perceptions and prejudices of their culture, and that patriarchy is sinful, sexist, and oppressive of women—reject all patriarchal doctrines and teachings. This is evident in the writings of liberal Christian feminists: mainline, radical and post-Christian.²⁴ Daly has concluded that the pervasiveness of patriarchy in the OT, as well as the NT, requires a rejection of the teachings and doctrines of the Judaic-Christian tradition.²⁵ Most liberal feminists are not willing to follow her in turning their backs on Christianity. Their conclusion is that, while patriarchy has been incorporated into the codified tradition of the Bible, the Bible contains other themes and traditions that promote feminist theology and ethics. When one comes to the Bible with what Ruether designates as the critical principle of feminist theology—namely, whatever promotes the full humanity of women²⁶—one can find themes that modern feminists can accept. This critical principle allows feminists to appropriate the prophetic-liberating traditions in the Bible that promote the liberation of women while rejecting the patriarchal elements in the Bible.²⁷ Other feminists, such as Tribble²⁸ and Russell,²⁹ maintain that the problem for women is centuries

²³ K. D. Sakenfeld states: "For those who do not choose to ignore the Bible completely as a source for their religious identity, the question of what to do with this patriarchal and/or patriarchally interpreted book is foundational to theological method" ("Feminist Perspectives on Bible and Theology," *Int* 42 [January 1988] 6).

²⁴ For the sake of simple reference I will refer to all three types as liberal feminists. What they share is the rejection of the plenary verbal inspiration and, therefore, the infallibility of the Bible.

²⁵ Daly, "After" 54–59.

²⁶ Ruether, *Sexism* 18–19.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 22–23.

²⁸ See P. Tribble, "Eve and Adam: Genesis 2–3 Reread," *Womanspirit* 74–83. Using a hermeneutic of remembrance, Tribble has also focused on Biblical texts portraying the suffering and abuse of women. In this approach she "retells biblical stories of terror *in memoriam*, offering sympathetic readings about abused women" ("Feminist" 27).

²⁹ L. M. Russell, "Authority and Challenge of Feminist Interpretation," *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Russell; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) 145.

of male exegesis of the Bible. They advocate the advancement of the full humanity of women by reinterpreting Biblical texts and by highlighting neglected ones. Still others urge a study of Biblical texts about women "to learn from the intersection of experience of ancient and modern women living in patriarchal cultures."³⁰

What is evident in this perspective by liberal feminists is their rejection of the Bible as the authoritative Word of God. (1) The Bible is viewed as containing the erroneous expressions of the cultural patriarchy of the OT era. (2) The Word of God in the Bible is determined by the application of the major critical principle of feminist theology: "the promotion of the full humanity of women."³¹ (Margaret Farley suggests that this includes within it two closely related principles: the equality and the mutuality of men and women.)³² Whatever denies or diminishes this principle is neither redemptive nor reflective of the divine or the nature of things,³³ and it does not have the authority of an authentic revelation of truth.³⁴ (3) This view denies the unity of a Christian ethic. While liberal feminists view the NT as containing a more positive vision of women, especially as expressed in Gal 3:28, they consider it as still embodying the conflict between patriarchal and liberating norms for women.³⁵ There can be no unity between these two Biblical perspectives. The starting point for feminist study of the Bible is what Katherine Sakenfeld describes as a "radical suspicion . . . [that is on the alert] not only for explicit patriarchal bias but also for evidence of more subtle androcentrism in the worldview of the biblical authors."³⁶ Thereby one can expose and reject patriarchal themes and expound and promote themes of liberation and equality.

Evangelical feminists claim that they do not follow liberal feminists in rejecting the authority of the Bible. Rebecca Anne Martin insists that, while other feminists either reject the Bible entirely or seek to interpret it from the perspective of women's experience,

evangelical feminists regard the Bible as authoritative in its entirety, and maintain that sexism in the church derives from the traditional practice of interpreting the Bible in the patriarchal light of "men's experience."

She argues that evangelical feminism does not attempt to rewrite the Bible or usurp Biblical authority by imposing a woman-centered hermeneutic upon it. It seeks to correct an historical imbalance resulting from a male-centered interpretation of the Bible.³⁷

³⁰ Sakenfeld, "Feminist Perspectives" 11.

³¹ Ruether, *Sexism* 18.

³² M. A. Farley, "Feminist Consciousness and the Interpretation of Scripture," *Feminist Interpretation* 44–45.

³³ See Ruether, *Sexism* 18–19.

³⁴ K. D. Sakenfeld, "Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials," *Feminist Interpretation* 49.

³⁵ See Ruether, *Sexism* 33–34; E. S. Fiorenza, "Women in the Early Christian Movement," *Womanspirit* 86; Carr, *Transforming* 7.

³⁶ Sakenfeld, "Feminist Uses" 56.

³⁷ R. A. Martin, "Why Are Evangelicals at War Over the 'Women Issue'? Understanding the Nature of the Conflict" (unpublished paper distributed by Christians for Biblical Equality, 1992) 3–4.

Of course the matter of the pervasiveness of patriarchy in the OT, and elements of it in the NT, still must be dealt with, since many evangelical feminists consider it just as sinful as liberal feminists do. Scott McClelland contends that the Mosaic legislation contained regulations that were “ultimately used to discriminate against women as a group.”³⁸ Tucker finds it full of “sex discrimination.”³⁹ Hull maintains that patriarchy “undermines the biblical ideal of the ‘one flesh’ union in marriage.”⁴⁰ Bilezikian speaks of “the oppressive nature of the patriarchal system” in the OT.⁴¹ He considers its family structure both “inhumane” in its treatment of women⁴² and “depraved” in its dehumanizing effect on both men and women.⁴³ Many evangelical feminists, such as Evans,⁴⁴ McClelland⁴⁵ and Van Leeuwen,⁴⁶ view the existence of patriarchy in the OT as a system of oppression resulting from the fall. Martin states: “The entrance of sin into God’s created order destroyed the equality and mutuality of the relationship between women and men; cultural patriarchy was the result.”⁴⁷

The obvious question that arises: Since this great evil permeates the OT legislation, although to a lesser degree than the surrounding cultures,⁴⁸ how can one coherently hold to the authority of the Bible? The answer that most evangelical feminists give to this question involves an appeal to divine accommodation. Since the accepted pattern of human culture in Middle Eastern societies at the time of the exodus was patriarchal, God accommodated himself to this culture in his revelation.⁴⁹ But this accommodation is only temporary. This is evident in the fact that the Biblical instructions contain principles that transcend the particular circumstances of Israel’s patriarchal culture.⁵⁰ It is also evident when one understands the progressive nature of God’s revelation. Martin states that God “progressively made known his redemptive plan whereby the essential equality of all people would be restored and the practice of sexual hierarchy brought to an end.”⁵¹ The full expression of God’s revelation on this issue is found in the NT, especially in passages such as Gal 3:28. These passages reveal not only the liberation of women from all patriarchal abuse and oppression

³⁸ McClelland, “New Reality” 60.

³⁹ Tucker, *Women* 58. She gives examples on pp. 58–63.

⁴⁰ Hull, *Equal* 98.

⁴¹ Bilezikian, *Beyond* 63.

⁴² *Ibid.* 64.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 68.

⁴⁴ Evans, *Women* 20.

⁴⁵ McClelland, “New Reality” 61.

⁴⁶ Van Leeuwen, *After Eden* 175.

⁴⁷ Martin, “Why” 5.

⁴⁸ Most evangelical feminists concede that the patriarchy in the OT treats women much better than the patriarchy of other cultures.

⁴⁹ Martin states: “God revealed himself and his plan for his people by means of this patriarchal culture” (“Why” 5). For similar statements see D. W. Diehl, “Theology and Feminism,” *Gender Matters* 38; Hull, *Equal* 100; Bilezikian, *Beyond* 68; S. N. Gundry, “Response to Pinnock, Nicole and Johnston,” *Women, Authority and the Bible* (ed. A. Mickelsen; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986) 62.

⁵⁰ Gundry, “Response” 62.

⁵¹ Martin, “Why” 5–6.

but also the full mutuality and equality of men and women in the body of Christ.⁵²

On the surface this approach has a degree of plausibility. The Bible is the revelation of God's redemptive plan that is progressively revealed in his dealings with his people. The fulfillment of that revelation is found in redemption in Jesus Christ, which is expounded in its fullness in the NT. OT sacrifices and ceremonies that prefigured Christ are abolished. The civil legislation God gave to his people, as a nation among other nations, comes to an end after Christ, since his people are no longer identified as members of a specific nation but are witnesses to Christ in all nations of the world. While remnants of pre-Christian instruction may linger after Christ's coming, the NT reveals God's final word of the fulfillment of his redemptive purposes and the life of faith for his people.

But there are problems with this explanation as applied to patriarchy. (1) Since patriarchy in the OT is understood as God's accommodating himself to a sinful cultural pattern, one can hardly avoid the conclusion that God in Scripture commanded sinful practices. Jewett admits: "The Old Testament everywhere assumes a patriarchal structure of society as an expression of the will of God," though he contends that it is not God's will for every time and civilization.⁵³ The argument is that God revealed himself to his people by means of a patriarchal culture so that he could work his redemptive purposes to end patriarchy.⁵⁴ But even with this positive redemptive goal in mind, one still is arguing that God prescribes evil so that good may come. This attributes a form of utilitarianism to God and his law: In order to overcome the evil of patriarchy he commands his people to do that evil for a time. The good goal justifies the evil means. In the book of Romans Paul condemns and denounces utilitarianism (Rom 3:8) and any suggestion that God's law or his acts are evil (3:5-6; 7:7, 14).

Evangelical feminists and egalitarians maintain that the emphasis here is not on God's commanding of evil but on his restraining of evil and injustice. It is argued that, as a result of the fall, patriarchy is simply a fact of fallen humanity to which God accommodates his instructions to his people. Bilezikian maintains that in the OT "God's Word was applied to sinful conditions such as polygamy, patriarchy, and adultery, and so on, not to condone or endorse such evils but to limit the damaging effects of those inevitable results of the fall."⁵⁵ This restraining strategy is the first step toward the redemptive goal, which is the abolition of the sinful patterns themselves.

This argument is supported by appeal to two practices mentioned in OT legislation that are condemned in the NT: divorce and polygamy. In Deut 24:1-4 allowance is made for a man to divorce his wife "who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her" (24:1 NIV). This is obviously not adultery, since the penalty for adultery was death

⁵² See *ibid.* 6-7; Evans, *Women* 132; Bilezikian, *Beyond* 119.

⁵³ Jewett, *Man* 129; see also Mollenkott, *Women* 91.

⁵⁴ See Diehl, "Theology" 38; Martin, "Why" 5-6; Bilezikian, *Beyond* 60.

⁵⁵ Bilezikian, *Beyond* 61.

(22:22). The Pharisees appeal to 24:1–4 in an argument with Jesus to justify divorcing one's wife (Matt 19:7). In response Jesus states: "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning" (19:8).⁵⁶ The clear implication is that while God tolerated such divorce (for grounds lesser than adultery) he did not legitimate it. The Mosaic legislation regulated the evil to avoid even worse evils and abuses occurring. The same argument applies to polygamy. The foundational passage on marriage in Gen 2:24, as well as appeals to it in Matt 19:3–9; 1 Cor 6:16; Eph 5:31, present monogamy as God's norm for marriage.⁵⁷ The references to polygamy in the OT legislation (Exod 21:10; Deut 21:15–17) should be seen not as legitimation but rather as regulation of an evil practice due to the hardness of hearts.⁵⁸

There are two important points here. (1) Because God's revelation to his people includes civil law, the civil legislation in the OT—like all social legislation—must adapt to the historical situation. As Oliver O'Donovan notes: "The social legislator . . . has to be content to control what he cannot eradicate."⁵⁹ (2) God showed forbearance, but not approval, of these two practices due to the progressive nature of his revelation. John Murray states: "The greater the degree of revelation, the greater the responsibility and the more severe the judgment of God upon the transgression."⁶⁰ With the fullness of revelation in Jesus Christ, God no longer tolerates such evils. He requires his people to live in accord with his holy norms.

While an appeal to the nature of civil legislation and the progressive nature of God's revelation in the Bible provides a credible justification for God's forbearance of divorce and polygamy in the OT era and their condemnation in the NT, there are reasons for questioning the application of this to patriarchy. For one thing there are no teachings in the NT that explicitly condemn patriarchy as there are for divorce and polygamy. In fact most feminists admit that there are instructions in the NT that continue patriarchal patterns for marriage and church leadership.⁶¹ Evangelical feminists base their argument for the abolition of patriarchy in the NT on passages that proclaim the new reality inaugurated with the coming of

⁵⁶ It is significant that the Pharisees' question was "Why then did Moses command [*eneteilato*] that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" (Matt 19:7) while Jesus' answer was "Moses permitted [*epetrepson*] you to divorce your wives" (19:8).

⁵⁷ For a brief discussion of this see J. Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 29–30.

⁵⁸ This is not true of the levirate law of Deut 25:5–6. The obligation to marry one's brother's widow was to maintain his line so that his land would not be lost to his family.

⁵⁹ O. M. T. O'Donovan, "Towards an Interpretation of Biblical Ethics," *TynBul* 27 (1976) 66.

⁶⁰ Murray, *Principles* 18.

⁶¹ Evans, *Women* 112–113; Diehl, "Theology" 38–39; A. Mickelsen, "An Egalitarian View: There Is Neither Male nor Female in Christ," *Women in Ministry: Four Views* (ed. B. and R. G. Clouse; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989) 203–204; R. Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 87; "Authority, Hierachy and Leadership Patterns in the Bible," *Women, Authority and the Bible* 83–84. There are some, such as Bilezikian (*Beyond* 193), who argue that in NT teachings all vestiges of patriarchy are gone and that we find full mutuality and equality between men and women. This view is a minority one among evangelical feminists.

Christ, the chief one being Gal 3:28. Klyne Snodgrass declares Gal 3:28 to be “the most socially explosive text in the New Testament,”⁶² demanding full social and ecclesiastical equality for women.⁶³ David Diehl argues that God’s redemptive purpose to overcome patriarchy is evident in the social application of the gospel, summarized in Gal 3:28. A proper understanding of this passage “leads to egalitarianism in the home, church and society.”⁶⁴ Tucker argues that Gal 3:28 does not refer merely to one’s soteriological standing before God but must also apply to the practice of social relationships.⁶⁵

Of course this is not an interpretation accepted by all evangelicals. Many others understand Gal 3:28 as proclaiming unity in Christ but not egalitarianism. Hence they do not find such a radical change in male-female relations, other than those changes resulting from the abolition of the civil legislation defining the people of God as a nation among nations. My point here is not to dismiss the interpretation of Gal 3:28 by evangelical feminists but simply to note that the appeal to it does not settle the argument. That is, while evangelicals generally accept Matt 19:3–9; 1 Cor 6:16; Eph 5:31 as condemnations of divorce and polygamy (forborne by God in the OT), appeals to Gal 3:28 do not settle the questions concerning the pattern of patriarchy in the OT and NT. To stop there is to beg the question. Further, if one then uses Gal 3:28, with the assumption that it abolishes patriarchy, to interpret other passages in the NT that appear to contradict this assumption, one is using a circular argument. Such a method of interpretation incorporates assumptions concerning Gal 3:28 that are then used in the interpretation of other passages to make them fit with one’s initial assumptions about Gal 3:28.

Another reason for questioning the view that patriarchy is an evil tolerated in the OT is God’s repeated description of his laws and statutes, revealed in the Pentateuch, as the pattern of holiness for his people. God called the Israelites to be distinct from other nations around them (Lev 20:24). It was in obeying his decrees, commands and laws that Israel was set apart as a holy nation and that it manifested the holiness of God (19:2–6; Deut 26:16–19). The Israelites were the chosen people, distinct from the surrounding nations, because God had revealed to them his chosen culture, distinct from that of the surrounding nations.⁶⁶ If patriarchy is such a great evil, how could the pattern of patriarchy, pervasive in the social legislation of Israel, set the people apart as a holy nation? It is one thing to find points in the legislation at which there is a forbearance of and accommodation to the hardness of sinful human hearts. It is quite another thing

⁶² K. R. Snodgrass, “Galatians 3:28: Conundrum or Solution,” *Women, Authority and the Bible* 168.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 180–181.

⁶⁴ Diehl, “Theology” 38. Similar appeals to Gal 3:28 for the abolition of patriarchy after Christ are found in Evans, *Women* 62–63; Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We’re Meant to Be* 101–102.

⁶⁵ Tucker, *Women* 125.

⁶⁶ W. Oddie makes this point in *What Will Happen to God? Feminism and the Reconstruction of Christian Belief* (London: SPCK, 1984) 50–51.

to argue that the pervasive pattern of patriarchy in male-female relations that God legislated could still set Israel apart as a holy nation. If all the nations around Israel were also thoroughly patriarchal, the only distinguishing feature of Israel's pattern was the restraint of the extent of the evil. That is a rather weak and limited view of the distinctive holiness of the Israelites in male-female relations when compared to the nations around them.

II. PATRIARCHY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Thus far we have considered the arguments by evangelical feminists that viewing OT patriarchy as evil does not undermine the authority of Scripture. Appeal is made to progressive revelation culminating in the full equality and mutuality of men and women after the coming of Christ. Galatians 3:28 and similar passages are said to announce the new egalitarian reality in Christ. But evangelical feminists admit that this does not mark the end of patriarchy in the Bible. Most admit that elements of it remain in the NT.

Explanations vary. Jewett⁶⁷ and Mollenkott⁶⁸ see in Paul's letters a conflict between ideas from his rabbinic background, evident in his teachings on the silence and subordination of women (1 Cor 11:9; 14:34–35; 1 Tim 2:11–15), and ideas expressing the liberating effects of the gospel of Christ, evident in passages expressing the unity and equality of men and women in Christ (Gal 3:28). Since this posits a conflict in Paul's writings between teachings in accord with and in opposition to the gospel, most evangelicals reject this interpretation.

The more common view held by evangelicals is that patriarchy still appears in the NT books because the authors only began the process of implementing the liberating principle of Gal 3:28 to male-female relationships. Some of the reasons offered for this are: to wait until women had been properly instructed in the use of authority,⁶⁹ not to give offense to the gospel in the surrounding patriarchal society,⁷⁰ and to begin to set in motion the egalitarian principle of the gospel in the social circumstances of the time.⁷¹ The common feature of the viewpoint behind these diverse reasons is the assumption that while we find the norm of egalitarianism expressed in the NT

⁶⁷ Jewett, *Man* 112–119.

⁶⁸ Mollenkott, *Women* 95–102

⁶⁹ A. B. Spencer argues that because the women at Ephesus were being deceived by unorthodox teaching, Paul (in 1 Timothy 2) restrained the women there from teaching "until they were well instructed and from using authority in a destructive manner" (*Beyond the Curse: Women Called to Ministry* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 1989] 134).

⁷⁰ W. L. Liefeld contends that this is why Paul places restrictions on women in 1 Tim 2:12–15; 1 Cor 14:34. "Christian women should follow pre-Christian norms in order not to offend Jews . . . just as they follow conventional ethics not to offend pagans" ("A Plural Ministry View: Your Sons and Daughters Shall Prophesy," *Women in Ministry: Four Views* 142). Diehl states that Paul "applied these principles [of equality in Christ and mutual submission] in moderation in relation to existing customs for the sake and testimony of the Gospel" ("Theology" 38).

⁷¹ See Longenecker, *Social Ethics* 68; "Authority" 83.

we also find specific instructions that fall short of that norm. The remainder of this paper analyzes the implications of that assumption. The focus is on the arguments of Richard Longenecker because, in my view, he has the most fully developed hermeneutic that justifies this assumption. Some reference is made to others with similar arguments.

Longenecker contends that in the NT we find only the beginnings of the implementation of the full equality and mutuality of women. The NT declares the ethical principles that derive from the gospel and describes how those principles were put into practice in various situations in the gospel period. The NT writers

began to work out the full implications of that gospel for the situations they encountered—not always, admittedly, as fully as or adequately as we might wish from our later perspectives, but appropriately for their day and pointing the way to a fuller understanding and more adequate application in later times.⁷²

This teaches the need for a developmental hermeneutic in applying the principles of the gospel to male-female relations today. Beginning with the gospel principles enunciated by the NT writers, most notably Gal 3:28, we should “endeavor to follow the path that they marked out for the application of those gospel principles, seeking to carry out their work in fuller and more significant ways.”⁷³ Since Paul did not go as far in applying Gal 3:28 to male-female relations as he did for Jew-Gentile and slave-free relations, Christians must express this truth for men and women today.⁷⁴

Alvera Mickelsen suggests that in the Bible we find the “highest principles [that] must take first place in our considerations and take top priority in all we do.” Examples of these are the golden rule of Matt 7:12 and the principle of equality in Gal 3:26–29. In addition to these “the Bible also has many regulations for people ‘where they were’ that were not necessarily meant to apply to all peoples under all circumstances.” 1 Timothy 2:11–12 is a clear example of the latter. We must understand the many commands in the Bible with this distinction in mind.⁷⁵ Walter Liefeld takes a similar approach. He contends that in Paul’s teachings we must differentiate between instructions to women grounded in redemption and new creation on the one hand and instructions to women grounded in pre-Christian (that is, OT) norms on the other. Paul appeals to the former to teach women’s equal standing with men (Gal 3:28) and the relationship between husbands and wives (Eph 5:22–33; 1 Cor 11:11–12). He appeals to the latter to place restrictions on women so as not to offend Jews or pagans (1 Tim 2:12–13; 1 Cor 14:34).⁷⁶

The first matter to consider here is the nature of Scripture implied in this approach. This perspective finds in the NT normative principles, such

⁷² Longenecker, *Social Ethics* 27.

⁷³ *Ibid.* 28.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 93.

⁷⁵ Mickelsen, “Egalitarian” 177.

⁷⁶ Liefeld, “Plural” 142.

as Gal 3:28, and the application of principles. The gospel principles are clearly the will of God. But are the application of principles the will of God? It depends. Where the applications are grounded in and embody gospel principles they do reveal God's norms for us. But Mickelsen and Liefeld argue that there are instructions in the NT that fall short of the highest norms of the gospel and that these are not universally true.⁷⁷ Longenecker contends that many NT applications reveal only the beginnings of the implications of gospel principles as the writers understood them. The limited understanding of the writers resulted in inadequate applications to male-female relations. In my judgment, what this view states is that some of the NT teaching is fully divine and some is less than fully divine—that is, the NT sometimes reflects the deficient perspective of the human author or his accommodation to sub-Christian norms. This results in defective presentations of male-female relations in the NT at certain points.

This raises a whole host of questions:⁷⁸ How does one determine which Biblical instructions are which? What criteria does one use? Does one need to adopt a hermeneutic of suspicion, being on the lookout for the limited understandings and inadequate applications of the authors, or their accommodation to pre-Christian norms? The reason given for the authors' deficient teachings is the cultural environment that shaped them and into which they spoke. But why limit this to accommodation or to defective applications by NT authors? Why not allow, as David Scholer does, for NT texts in which the authors' views themselves reflect the patriarchal, androcentric and misogynist character of their environment?⁷⁹

The next matter to consider is whether this position maintains the authority of the NT today. It appears to maintain the authority of the gospel principles, such as Gal 3:28. But it clearly does not maintain the authority of the specific instructions found in the NT. Liefeld and Mickelsen argue that certain instructions, deemed to be pre-Christian when evaluated by Gal 3:28, have no universal authority. For Longenecker, since many applications are deficient when compared to Gal 3:28 it is only the fuller understanding and more adequate application of the gospel principles, which occur subsequent to the NT writings, that are authoritative for male-female relations. What is clear here is that it is the understanding and application of Gal 3:28 espoused by modern Biblical feminists that is the authority by which NT teachings are determined to be inadequate or sub-Christian.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*; Mickelsen, "Egalitarian" 177.

⁷⁸ The implications of this divine/human split in Biblical teaching are discussed by W. M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation* (Scottsdale/Waterloo: Herald, 1983) 189.

⁷⁹ The texts that he gives to illustrate this are Rev 14:1–5; 1 Tim 5:3–16; 1 Cor 11:2–16; Eph 5:24 (D. M. Scholer, "Feminist Hermeneutics and Evangelical Interpretation," *JETS* 30 [December 1987] 414–416).

⁸⁰ Again, note the circularity of the argument.

Therefore one need not submit to those instructions in the NT that do not embody that understanding.⁸¹

Willard Swartley notes several features of this approach that bear upon the authority of Scripture. While his comments are directed towards Longenecker's "developmental hermeneutic"⁸² they also apply to similar views, such as those of Mickelsen and Liefeld. First, Longenecker's approach incorporates the notion of a progressive application of gospel principles.⁸³ This makes use of the modern western presupposition of progress, an assumption that involves the modern hubris that our understandings and cultural patterns of male-female relations are superior to those of our ancestors simply because of our historical position. We understand the implications of Gal 3:28 better than Paul did. This undermines the authority of the Bible by assuming that our modern perspective may evaluate the patterns of application to male-female practices in the NT.⁸⁴ But is the modern perspective true progress or not? Swartley rightly notes that "the proposed criteria of measurement [of the notion of progress] are neither self-evident truths nor consensually agreed-upon values."⁸⁵

The second issue in this developmental approach that touches on the authority of the Bible is the notion of equality that is employed. Swartley warns against "the subtle hijacking of the biblical agenda" by appeal to the concept of equality.⁸⁶ The argument of evangelical feminists is that the complete implementation of Gal 3:28 leads to male-female relations of full equality characterized by egalitarianism in roles and relations. But this view of equality is the modern cultural view of equality. Is this the view of equality found in the NT? One cannot simply appeal to Gal 3:28 and similar passages to answer this, for that begs the question.⁸⁷ Nor can one resolve the issue by appealing to passages where the NT applies the principle of equality, since evangelical feminists argue that some applications are incomplete or do not reflect the principle of equality. They still contain patriarchal elements. The only way the argument works is if one begins with the assumption that equality means egalitarianism. But to do so is to

⁸¹ S. B. Clark argues, rightly in my opinion, that this is one of the modern ways that Scriptural authority is bypassed (*Man and Woman in Christ* [Ann Arbor: Servant, 1980] 353).

⁸² W. M. Swartley, "Response," *Women, Authority and the Bible* 85–91. This article is a response to Longenecker, "Authority" 66–85.

⁸³ Longenecker states that the implementation of the new life in Christ "is portrayed in the New Testament as having been only begun and is described as being then worked out in a progressive fashion" ("Authority" 83). Although the gospel was eloquently declared in the NT it "was implemented only progressively and often slowly" (ibid. 84).

⁸⁴ Clark considers this another way the authority of the Bible is bypassed (*Man* 353–354).

⁸⁵ Swartley, "Response" 90.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Swartley contends that even if one grants that the concept of equality is present in the Bible, this raises larger questions: "What concept of equality? From what social, political, and economic world context? Precisely what does equality mean when viewed within the social world of these ancient texts? And what does it mean today?" (*Slavery* 184).

make this assumption the ultimate authority on the matter, for it determines the outcome of the investigation.

Another way to highlight the issue of authority for evangelical feminism is to ask: Can the Bible raise questions about the critical principle of feminism—namely, the full humanity of women as defined by equality in roles? Are there passages in the NT that can evaluate the feminist understanding of Gal 3:28 and of those passages that display patriarchal elements? This is not an argument for a value-neutral position. Rather, as George Stroup states, it is a question as to whether there is any basis for critical appraisal of feminist interpretations apart from the community of likeminded people.⁸⁸ If the interpretation of the Bible takes place within the hermeneutical circle where a critical assumption determines the meaning of the texts, there must be the possibility of the Bible critically evaluating the veracity of that assumption. If not, then the principle—and not the Bible—is the ultimate authority.

The final important issue is the matter of the unity of a Biblical ethic. Does the position that the NT contains teachings on the application of gospel principles that are incomplete and inadequate by the standard of Gal 3:28 have any implications for the unity of a Biblical ethic? To answer this question let us again consider Longenecker's view.⁸⁹ He contends that in the NT we find two major themes: what God has done in creation, and what God has done in redemption in Jesus Christ. When Paul has the theme of creation in mind, he teaches the hierarchical ordering of social structures and the commands of headship and subordination. When he has the theme of redemption in mind (expressed in Gal 3:28), he emphasizes freedom, mutuality and equality.⁹⁰ Because the focus of the NT is on redemption, Paul—as well as the rest of the NT writers—places the emphasis on and gives priority to redemption. Longenecker insists that in doing so these authors maintain a unity between the themes of creation and redemption.⁹¹ Unfortunately Longenecker does not give any explanation of how this unity is maintained.

I do not see how there is any unity. If the NT inaugurates an ethic of redemption that is given priority over the ethic of creation, then the latter ceases to be in effect. There is no unity between the two ethical themes. If creation involves hierarchy and subordination, and if redemption involves freedom, mutuality and equality, one cannot unify these two themes. This is most evident in one's understanding of women's roles in marriage and the Church.⁹²

⁸⁸ See G. W. Stroup, "Between Echo and Narcissus: The Role of the Bible in Feminist Theology," *Int* 42 (January 1988) 27. He pointedly asks: "What safe-guards are there to self-deception?" (*ibid.*).

⁸⁹ For some of the following material on Longenecker I draw upon G. H. Haas, "The Kingdom and Slavery: A Test Case for Social Ethics," *Calvin Theological Journal* (March 1993) 80 ff.

⁹⁰ Longenecker, *Social Ethics* 84, 91–92; "Authority" 80–85.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² O. O'Donovan has argued quite convincingly, it seems to me, that a unified Biblical ethic results from understanding redemption as the reaffirmation of the created moral order (*Resurrection*

The problem of a unified Biblical ethic arises not merely in Longenecker's dichotomy between a creational and redemptive ethic. It also occurs at the point of his understanding of the relationship of the redemptive principle set forth in Gal 3:28 to specific applications of this principle in social relations (for example, to male-female relations). O'Donovan notes that any ethical system involves both general principles and the application of those principles. If the apostle Paul is teaching a unified Christian ethic, we assume there is a consistency between the principles and applications. O'Donovan states:

If at one point he gives a specific injunction which suggests, in connection with something he says elsewhere, a more general principle accounting for them both, the reader assumes that author will stand by that principle, that he does not, in other words, change his mind from one moment to the next. . . . Nor is it too much to assume that the expositor can identify that more general principle and reapply it to the different, but related, kinds of situation which confront him.⁹³

The problem with Longenecker's position, and similar ones, is that we cannot assume such a consistency between the principle of Gal 3:28 and the instruction on specific issues in the NT. We are told that the teachings are only the initial implications of the gospel, inadequate and incomplete in light of the full understanding of Gal 3:28. Thus there is no underlying unity to the various applications we find in Paul's writing.

This points to another problem in Longenecker's (or any parallel) notion of a "developmental hermeneutic" that bears on the unity of a Biblical ethic. If some of the specific applications in the NT are sub-Christian or point to a "fuller understanding and more adequate application in later times,"⁹⁴ if the NT sets forth a pattern for applying the gospel principles in "fuller and more adequate ways" than the authors themselves did,⁹⁵ then our understanding of these applications to male-female relations must go beyond Paul's. In other words a "progressive hermeneutic" means a "progressive understanding." Note that this is not a progressive understanding of those applications revealed in Scripture. Rather, it is a progressive understanding that goes beyond, improves upon, or corrects those applications revealed in Scripture. The distinction is crucial. Evangelicals have always stressed that God has given us the final and complete revelation of his purposes in the Bible. But, as Swartley notes, if revelation is the basis of our understanding, "the latter cannot develop essentially beyond the zenith point in divine revelation."⁹⁶ If, however, one holds to a progressive understanding that goes

and Moral Order [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986] 21). When an ethic of redemption overrides an ethic of creation, this unity is lost and one falls prey to historicism and relativism (*ibid.* 58 ff.).

⁹³ O. M. T. O'Donovan, "The Possibility of a Biblical Ethic," *Theological Students Fellowship Bulletin* 67 (1973) 19.

⁹⁴ Longenecker, *Social Ethics* 27.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 28.

⁹⁶ Swartley, "Response" 88.

beyond what is found in the NT, one is saying that the Bible is incomplete as it stands and that it requires our progressive understanding to clarify, complete and improve upon its teachings.

III. CONCLUSION

The feminist assumption that patriarchy is an evil tolerated by God in the OT (with continuing remnants in the NT) undermines the authority of the Bible. It implies an understanding of Scripture in which God accommodates himself to sinful human practices and that undermines its distinctive character as a holy pattern of life for his people. There is no explicit Biblical evidence for this. Further, since these patriarchal patterns continue in the specific teachings of the NT, evangelical feminists reject the authority of these teachings by designating them as sub-Christian teachings or by appealing to a developmental hermeneutic in understanding them. This inevitably forces one to hold that the NT contains both divine and human elements and that the human elements must be discarded or improved upon. This undermines not only the authority of Scripture but also the unity of a Biblical ethic. Therefore my conclusion is that to retain the authority of the Bible and the unity of a Biblical ethic one must reject the assumption that the patriarchy found in the Bible is an evil.