Theological Hegemony and Oppositional Interpretive Codes: The Case of Evangelical Christian Feminism

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This paper examines how theological discourse creates particular types of interpretive codes. Dominant religious communities rely upon received theological traditions to enforce a hegemony of acceptable thought and action upon their members. Within that hegemonic structure, alternative communities offer oppositional interpretive codes to reinterpret the received theology and thus call into question the dominant tradition. Evangelical Christian feminist literature is examined as an exemplar of how one such alternative community articulates oppositional interpretive codes. This study investigates hegemony and opposition in religious discourse by stressing the interplay among texts and audiences in creating meaning, and by highlighting the social dimensions of religious belief and spiritual experience.

CONSIDERABLE CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL WORK demonstrates how audiences decode textual messages. Some audiences do not unwittingly embrace the dominant ideology, but instead interpret and reconstruct messages in manners suitable to oppositional interests (Steiner, Jenkins). A critic's concern with active audiences, nonetheless, must be coupled with analyses of how dominant ideologies are inscribed in particular texts (Carragee). Audiences are not cultural dupes who accept whatever meanings powerful institutions provide them, but are constrained by the range of meanings they have access to. They are active, but not totally free to do whatever they want.

This essay illustrates that a focus on interpretive communities can enable critics to consider both dominant ideologies and audience activities. To do this, I examine the tactics evangelical Christian feminists use to reinterpret scriptural texts in ways that create an empowered role for women in the church. Following a theoretical introduction to my topic, an examination of the dominant readings of certain scriptural texts, and an examination of the strategies for oppositional readings provided by

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evangelical Christian feminist literature will be provided. Neither the “dominant tradition” nor Christian feminism are monolithic structures. I treat several mainline Protestant texts as exemplars of the dominant tradition, and I examine a particular body of literature as representative of evangelical Christian feminism.

HEGEMONY AND OPPOSITIONAL INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES

Hegemony is the dominant authority wielded by the powerful in a civil society. This authority is not won by physical force; it is “the spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group” (Gramsci 12). The hegemonic process produces a particular “common sense” that endorses the dominant interests in a society and encourages people to think and to interpret in line with the status quo.

The concept of hegemony relates to the practices of textual interpretation. People read texts “through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or—if the text is brand-new—through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions” (Brummett 72–73). People learn these interpretive habits through their membership in interpretive communities. An interpretive community is a loosely connected social group, the members of which share interpretive codes and strategies (Radway 53), that usually comprise the hegemonic common sense by which people constitute and popularize dominant meanings in a culture (Mailloux “Rhetorical Hermeneutics” 629).

Audiences cannot freely interpret discourse because the dominant culture limits “the polysemic potential of texts and of decodings” (Conduit 105). More work is required to create oppositional readings and that requirement makes such readings less prevalent and less popular than dominant interpretations.

Oppositional interpretive communities do exist, however, and they provide codes and strategies that foster alternative viewpoints and meanings (Steiner 8). Their presence enhances the probability that “subordinated social groups” will “invent and circulate counterdiscourses” that will facilitate oppositional interpretations (Conquergood 189).

Evangelical Christian feminist literature articulates codes that counter the dominant tradition and provide the symbolic tools needed to render oppositional decodings. Oppositional religious rhetoric implies the presence of a dominant tradition.

A DOMINANT THEOLOGICAL TRADITION

A dominant tradition affects interpretation in at least two ways: First, it provides the normative symbolic codes people use to construct their
worlds. Second, it forms the interpretive backdrop against which subaltern communities develop oppositional interpretations. That dominant interpretive backdrop consists of discursive practices and traditions that must be considered in an analysis of oppositional codes and strategies.

A Dominant Tradition in Historical Christianity

While no one dominant Christian tradition has established itself as a monolith, various Christian traditions share a theological heritage that contains dominant beliefs about the status of women. Most evangelical Christian feminists concur that the Christian tradition contains a widespread anti-female bias (Fiorenza; Ruether and Keller xiii). The "tradition" sketched below is perceived as dominant by those who articulate interpretive codes to oppose it.

During its first two centuries, the Christian church developed at least two different sets of attitudes about women. Gnostic sects described God as both masculine and feminine and integrated an egalitarian principle into their communal activities. The orthodox community, however, described God as exclusively masculine and by the third century had accepted "the domination of men over women as the divinely ordained order, not only for social and family life, but also for the Christian churches" (Pagels 66).

The early Church fathers solidified this view with a theology described by Reuther as "misogyny and the praise of the virginal woman" (150). Church leaders such as Jerome, in the fourth century, thought virginity to be the ideal female state and described menstruation and childbirth as vile and disgusting. They discouraged any sexual union, even within marriage, and advised temporary abstinence as a prerequisite for prayer and the sacraments (163–179). Augustine, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria all proclaimed that the male alone was created in God's image. A woman only acquired this image when she joined with and became subordinate to a male (156–157). The early Church fathers placed women in an awkward bind: they encouraged virginity but pronounced women spiritually incomplete without a male authority. Orthodox Christianity thus constructed a hierarchical order that required the subordination of women.

Medieval Christianity maintained this system primarily through the works of Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas affirmed the conclusion and the premises of the early Church fathers: males were superior because they possessed God's image to a greater degree than did women, and because the female body was a source of debasement and inferiority. The woman was created only for her sexuality and was inferior to the man morally, intellectually, and physically (Mclaughlin 217). Aquinas affirmed the ideal of female virginity, though he did articulate one alternative life style for the woman: the obedient wife. In either case, a woman's
salvation was "always qualified by the subordinate, auxiliary, and ultimately inferior character of female personhood relative to the masculine norm" (McLaughlin 251).

Reformation theologians granted women a place in "the priesthood of all believers" and consequently allowed women "greater personal freedom and responsibility" (Douglass 314). But a brief overview of Reformation theology reveals that women were still distinctly subservient to men. John Calvin, for example, held that the female sphere was private and maternal while the male sphere was public and social. In his view scripture granted women no authority to teach or to preach (Harkness 208). The maternal role should follow the recommendation in Ephesians 5:22-23, that the male be the head of the family and the female be obedient to the male (Douglass 299).

Martin Luther endorsed Calvin's assessment. Luther excluded women from ministry positions because they possessed inferior organizational skills and were weaker than men. He asserted that a woman's true calling was to motherhood, and that in bearing and raising children a woman "covers and conceals" her various intellectual and physical vices (Douglass 297). Powerful voices of Reformation theology thus reaffirmed that women were inferior to men in every capacity except the maternal.

Nineteenth century women became more active in revival movements and even comprised a majority within American Protestantism. But the typical church structure preserved male authority by positioning male elders, deacons, and vestries in support of the male minister. Any opportunities for women to preach or to serve in religious organizations were accompanied by denominational moves to restrict the number of women lay preachers and to distance women from the decision-making processes of established churches (James 7).

This brief survey explains the dominant interpretive backdrop that Christian feminists oppose. This tradition influences contemporary Christianity too.

A Dominant Tradition in Twentieth Century Christianity

Martin Marty contends that "three constituencies" make up the contemporary church: evangelicals, mainline Protestants, and Catholics (Public 3). My concern is with feminist discourse in the evangelical tradition.

The term "evangelical" refers to a form of Protestantism marked by born-again conversion experiences, a belief in the literal, unambiguous, and infallible nature of the Bible, and a commitment to convert the unsaved. The evangelical tradition is widespread and powerful. Evangelicalism is "synonymous with Protestant orthodoxy and conservative Protestantism," states Hunter, and it includes fundamentalism as well
as a variety of other "religious and denominational traditions—from the Pietistic traditions to the Confessional traditions and from the Baptist traditions to the Anabaptist traditions." Marty traces an evangelical resurgence that began in the 1950s and became one of "the most aggressive and vital forces in American religion" (Religion). The evangelical tradition's "code words" are now ensconced in American culture, and that has enabled "evangelical moralism" to challenge the Protestant mainline as a dominant religious influence (Religion 14, 330). One consequence has been a return to the traditional religious beliefs about women sketched in the preceding section.

The hegemony forged by this tradition manifests itself in several ways. The evangelical view of scripture, for example, emphasizes the infallibility of divine inspiration and the inerrancy of the Bible. "Infallibility" and "inerrancy" symbolize an orthodox view of Scripture that legitimates traditional interpretations (Religion; Scanzoni and Setta 233). Within this view the Bible is literally and absolutely correct; it is composed by divine inspiration and is thus the final word on matters of doctrine, institutional organization, social relationships, and, as I shall show, gender roles.

Charles Swindell, Larry Christenson, and James Dobson are three prominent evangelical authors whose works reveal the evangelical tradition's views about women. Their readings of passages in Ephesians 5, First Peter 3, and First Corinthians 11 illustrate these views. These scriptures are problematic for evangelical feminists precisely because this tradition endorses the interpretive codes of literalism and inerrancy, otherwise the verses could be "ignored or relativized" (Hunter 103).

Ephesians 5:22-24—"Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject to everything in their husbands."

Evangelicals often interpret this passage to order that wives be submissive to husbands. Swindoll notes of these verses that, "for wives, the basic role is one of submission, and the analogy is 'as to the Lord.' As the Christian wife would respond to her Lord, so she is to do to her husband" (41). Christenson asserts that God "established this order for the protection of women and the harmony of the home" (32). The dominant reading of this text constructs a basic role and character for women: they are submissive and they need protection. To constitute women in this way implies a corresponding constitution of men: they are superior as authorities and they are powerful as protectors. These "female" and "male" positions are based not on intellect, ability, or interest, but on the "nature" of the spousal role and on gender. The readings of the second passage make this clear.

First Peter 3:1-2, 7—Likewise you wives, be submissive to your husbands, so that some, though they do not obey the word, may be won without a word by the behavior of their
wives, when they see your reverent and chaste behavior... Likewise you husbands, live considerately with your wives, bestowing honor on the woman as the weaker sex, since you are joint heirs of the grace of life, in order that your prayers may not be hindered.

Dobson and Swindoll use this passage to assert that the man must control the decision-making process. Dobson writes that “God apparently expects a man to be the ultimate decision-maker in his family” (416). This hierarchical set-up privileges the male by requiring the woman to acquiesce even in situations characterized by turmoil and disruption. Swindoll asserts that “these verses call for a quiet spirit, a wife who is characterized by control and tranquility—in spite of a disruptive home situation kept in turmoil by a disobedient husband” (56).

As with the Ephesians passage, Swindoll reads First Peter to ground these roles in the nature and gender of the female. He writes that verse 7 “clearly states that of the two, the wife is the weaker partner. She is like a delicate vessel, deeply in need of being understood” (63). The “good” husband understands the weaker partner’s needs and accommodates those needs in the management of the home.

First Corinthians 11:3, 7–10—But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God... a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. (For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.) That is why a woman ought to have a veil on her head, because of the angels.

Christenson argues that women are vulnerable by nature and that their primary means of protection is a husband. “A woman’s vulnerability,” he asserts, “does not stop at the physical level. It includes also vulnerability at the emotional, psychological, and spiritual level. Here, too, she needs a husband’s authority and protection” (34–35). This passage indicates “that a woman who is unprotected by her husband’s authority is open to (evil) angelic influence” and “vulnerable to spiritual attack, especially along the lines of deception.” The passage thus explains Paul’s “otherwise puzzling advice” in First Timothy 2, where he admonishes women to keep silent, to learn submissiveness, and to refrain from teaching or wields authority over men (36). A woman’s role in the church, then, is limited by the weaknesses associated with her gender.

The evangelical tradition prescribes a particular role and nature for the “Christian” woman. She is submissive; she needs protection from physical and emotional attack, and from spiritual deception; she is to be obedient to male authority; she is to maintain a quiet and tranquil spirit even in the face of a disruptive male presence. These prescriptions are ordained by God and based in human nature and the biological fact of one’s gender. This tradition constrains those who articulate alternative visions of Christianity and the roles of women.
In the face of this dominant tradition, Christian feminists empower themselves by decoding texts in ways that oppose established interpretations and interests. This power depends partially on the feminists' "access to oppositional codes" (Condit 119). Dominant readings have become "common sense" and are rendered easily; oppositional readings take work and require access to non-traditional codes that feminists can use in interpretation. This section examines how some evangelical Christian feminists articulate oppositional codes for biblical interpretation.

Christian feminism, like the dominant tradition, is not a monolithic structure; various tensions exist among feminist theologians. Some theologians emphasize liberation from traditional roles while others reclaim marriage and motherhood as feminist options; some recognize the equality of masculine and feminine values while others affirm the superiority of feminine traits; and some reconstruct the Christian tradition in feminist terms while others reject that tradition in favor of new approaches to spirituality (Christ and Plaskow).

The evangelical feminist movement began in the mid 1970s and has become an outspoken minority voice within the evangelical tradition. It has produced a small but important body of evangelical feminist literature, including Daughters of Sarah, a noteworthy "evangelical feminist journal," and several important books such as All We’re Meant to Be by Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty, Women, Men and the Bible by Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, and The Apostle Paul and Women in the Church by Don Williams (Hunter 105). These texts exemplify evangelical feminist thought and articulate that community's oppositional codes.

This literature provides interpretive codes that both break from the dominant tradition and remain linked to it. Evangelical feminists see the Bible as the basis for their tradition. Fiorenza writes that the Christian tradition is marked by patriarchal scriptures that subordinate women, but that the canon contains egalitarian texts too. These texts, submerged within the dominant tradition, provide a biblical basis for non-patriarchal structures in the church and in society. Scripture is thus the "source for women's religious power as well as for their religious oppression" (35). Evangelical feminists hold that the Bible supports "the central tenets of feminism" (Mollenkott Women 90). So while evangelical feminists reject the dominant tradition's subordination of women, they affirm the Bible as central text. This affirmation of the Bible as a document of liberation links evangelical feminists to the dominant evangelical tradition.

Evangelical feminists, consequently, provide codes for a radical reinterpretation of scriptural texts rather than dismiss those texts altogether. Those who founded Daughters of Sarah assume "the Bible to
be a strong force” in their lives, and they work to challenge “traditional interpretations” and to offer “feminist alternatives” (Finger “Bible” 6). The feminist task is not to discover new sources, but to read traditional sources “in a different key” (Fiorenza xx). Evangelical feminists claim the Bible as a source of liberation and thus deprive it of its traditional power as an instrument of domination. They articulate alternative meanings for patriarchal passages traditionally assumed to be “direct, unambiguous, and without need of reinterpretation” (Hunter 103).

The dominant tradition’s interpretive codes are empowered by a common assumption: the Bible can be read objectively and will yield timeless Truths that provide instruction for how people should live. Christian feminists pit their oppositional code against this dominant tradition by describing the characteristics of their code and applying it in specific instances of interpretation. This code offers three guidelines for feminist interpretation. First, while all biblical texts relevant to a particular issue ought to be considered, “clearer texts should interpret less clear texts” (Scholer 13). Second, writers and readers of biblical texts must be seen to exist in a particular historical, cultural, and theological context. And third, scriptural authority is located in the interaction between text and female experience. Each of these guidelines facilitates specific oppositional decodings.

The Establishment of a Clear Text. The dominant tradition bases its interpretive code on First Timothy 2:11-12, which calls for women to be silent in the church (Scholer 13-14). Evangelical feminists challenge the dominant code by showing how First Timothy 2 is replete with unclear commands that the dominant tradition ignores. Verses nine and ten denounce jewelry and braided hair, and verse fifteen asserts that women can find “salvation by childbearing.” Because the contemporary relevance of these verses is not clear, evangelical feminists challenge this passage by providing another source of interpretation: Galatians 3:28, a passage that states “there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” This passage is “far more clear” than First Timothy 2 (Scholer 14), and it expresses the principle of gender equality that is the major theme in evangelical feminist discourse: “mutual submission of male and female under the headship of Christ” (Hunter 105).

Galatians 3:28 forces a new interpretation of Ephesians 5, a text I showed earlier to be central to the dominant tradition’s construction of women. Evangelical feminists argue that Ephesians 5:22-24, which call for wives to be subject to their husbands, must be understood in conjunction with verse 21, which calls for “mutual subordination.” Consequently, they conclude, “Paul begins with no doctrine of male superiority or dominance” (Williams 89). Ephesians 5 indicates that “Christian marriage is egalitarian and a partnership in that husbands and wives are to live in mutual submission to Christ and to each other” (Williams 92). To argue against mutual submission is “to argue against...
the mainstream of the New Testament” (Mollenkott Women 63). While the dominant tradition reads Ephesians 5 to affirm the subordination of women, evangelical feminists use this passage a call for equality.

Padgett uses the same principle of decoding to attribute to First Corinthians 11 a meaning almost exactly the reverse of its traditional interpretation. One point of particular interest is in verse three: “the head of woman is man.” For the dominant tradition this means that men have authority over women. But the Greek term for “head” means “origin” or “source,” not “authority” (7). Paul’s reference is thus to the creation story; he does not teach a doctrine of male authority.

Evangelical feminists assert that the Greek word for “head” used in this passage refers “not to a corporate organizational chart, but to a dynamic, organic, living unity... The ‘head’ of this living, growing organism,” they write, “is not its ruler but the source of its life” (Scanzoni and Hardesty 30–31). First Corinthians 11, consequently, does not dictate a “chain of command” (Scanzoni and Hardesty 22). The term “head” in this text refers to “source or origin” rather than to “superiority or rule,” and that interpretation extends to Ephesians 5 where headship “denotes the source of life and growth rather than mere authority” (Williams 64, 90). In each case these writers establish a clear, oppositional text based on the concept of mutual submission.

This strategy applies beyond the Christian New Testament. Some writers propose that feminist interpretation of the Hebrew Scripture must “be grounded in the creation texts of Genesis 1–3,” but that those chapters must be re-read to provide a clear basis for the understanding of other texts. Trible notes, for example, that the Hebrew word translated to describe Eve as a “helper” actually “connotes superiority, not inferiority, and thus suggests a picture of the female different from the traditional one” (6). Trible claims that Eve in this story is more intelligent and thoughtful than Adam, because she interprets the serpent’s request and considers the consequence of eating the fruit while Adam remains silent.

Cary reiterates Trible’s reading. He writes that “in the Hebrew Scriptures a ‘helper’ is one in a position of strength” (“Seeing” 9). The Revised Standard Version of the Bible simply omits from Genesis 3:6 a phrase which indicates both that Adam and Eve were together when the forbidden fruit was offered (this interpretation opposes the traditional claim that Eve was deceived before Adam), and that before the fall Eve was the thinker and the spokesperson (7). Cary thus clarifies a text from which the interpretation of other scriptural passages might proceed.

Evangelical Christian feminists articulate a particular interpretive code that calls for the establishment of a clear text. This code facilitates oppositional feminist readings of Scripture.

The Influence of Context. Both writers and readers are shaped by the contexts in which they live. Evangelical feminists believe that although
people should not dismiss Biblical texts "as merely 'cultural' and therefore irrelevant," those same texts must be understood as "culturally relative" (Cary "One" 19). Because the scriptures were composed in a patriarchal context, it is "basic to any feminist reading of the Bible that one cannot absolutize the culture in which the Bible was written" (Mollenkott Women 91). This code opens various interpretive possibilities.

Horner's reading of Luke 10:38–42 is instructive. In this passage Jesus visits Mary and Martha, and endorses Mary's behavior—she sits and listens to him teach—while questioning Martha's behavior—she is "distracted with much serving." This story frequently reinforces traditional female roles: "to be quiet is good, to be active is bad." This reading presumes a "cultural context of patriarchy," but a feminist critical method of interpretation would draw an entirely different conclusion:

Traditional women's work is dismissed as not important while the nontraditional role of woman as learner is praised. This is a new insight, as Mary is usually praised for her quiet, submissive demeanor rather than her intellectual prowess. Martha is a loser on all counts. Not only is her style wrong—she is confrontive and forceful—but her traditional "female" role of serving is deemed as so much busyness. (17)

Recognition of how the cultural context influences the traditional decoding of this text leads to an oppositional decoding consistent with feminist ideology.

The use of a contextual code for interpretation applies also to First Corinthians 14, a passage that forbids women from speaking in churches. The Greek term translated "speak" in this passage actually "implies production of sound rather than any specific communication of meaning" (Kroeger 10). The term becomes important when one considers the cultural context that this passage addresses. Two religious "cults" prevailed in Corinth at the time, and "both were notorious for the wild, debauched, and insane behavior of their female adherents" (Kroeger 11). The Corinthian church included converts from these cults, so evangelical feminists conclude that Paul does not prohibit speech but "frenzied and meaningless shouting" (Kroeger 12). The context is important; "Paul was writing to specific women in a specific time and place, and for a specific and limited problem" (Kroeger 13).

Evangelical feminists apply this code to other key texts of the dominant tradition. Scanzoni and Hardesty's discussion of Ephesians 5, for example, notes that New Testament Greek culture viewed women as their husband's property. To urge wives to obey and to submit was not new; the point was so well known that it did not need explanation. What is new in Ephesians 5 is that husbands and wives are to relate to each other out of love and mutual respect (98–100). Their recognition of the cultural context enables evangelical feminists to decode this text oppositionally.

A recognition of cultural and historical context is essential to Mollenkott's interpretation of First Peter 3. Mutual submission was a
radical idea at this time, so Paul does not explicitly charge men to submit because he could not overturn "the whole social order" (Women 30). Instead, he attempted to facilitate equitable marital and social relationships in a rhetorically effective manner. While First Peter 3 refers to women as "the weaker sex," this was either a cultural assumption or a reference "to the undisputed fact that first-century women were financially dependent upon men" (Women 26). First Peter 3 recommends that wives be submissive, reverent, and chaste, but this advice applies to a specific context: wives trying to evangelize unbelieving husbands. For a wife to be submissive in the patriarchal culture of the time, feminists say, was simply good "evangelistic strategy" (Scanzoni and Hardesty 93). All of these interpretations utilize cultural context to refute the dominant tradition's claim that the Bible prescribes a subordinate role for women.

In each case noted above, feminist interpretations abide by a particular interpretive code: an emphasis on the influence of context. Recognition of the historical and cultural contexts in which texts were composed enables evangelical Christian feminists to read biblical texts in opposition to the dominant tradition.

*The Location of Authority.* The dominant tradition locates spiritual authority in scriptural texts. Evangelical Christian feminists ascribe to scripture a special status, but a feminist interpretive code locates authority within female experience or within the intersections between female experience and scriptural texts. Some Christian feminists state that authority resides not "in the Bible but in women's experience," while others state that authority resides in those texts that are interpreted in conjunction with women's experience (Scholer 12). In either case they forge a connection between spiritual authority and female experience, and that connection has specific implications for biblical interpretation.

One criterion for establishing authority is the affirmation of women. "The Bible is carefully studied and whatever texts affirm women are considered authoritative; those that are patriarchal are denounced" ("Models" 15). Mollenkott examines numerous depictions of God, including "God as Nursing Mother," "God as Midwife," "God as Mother Eagle," and "God as Dame Wisdom." She unearths and thus affirms "the images of God as female that sprinkle the sacred writings of Judaism and Christianity" (Divine 7).

Trible identifies and critiques passages featuring men who offer their daughters as prostitutes (Gen. 19:8) or sacrifices (Judges 11:29-40), or women who are defined as the property of men (Ex. 20:17; Dt. 5:21). In these passages "the Bible promotes the sin of patriarchy" (4). Thus she questions their authority. But several passages that "show signs of female strength" are neglected by the dominant tradition. Exodus, for example, details stories of women who thwarted an Egyptian king's
efforts to execute newborn sons, who saved Moses' life, and who composed songs of triumph. Trible does not "denounce scripture as hopelessly misogynous," but combines "scriptural critique and feminist perspective" into a "hermeneutic that makes a difference" (5-7). She thus affirms the authority of female experience in scriptural interpretation.

This code also cites female role models within Scripture. To cite such role models affirms women's experiences and illustrates how the hegemonic interpretive tradition has ignored portions of the scriptural text which might undermine the dominant ideology. Huldah, an Old Testament prophetess to whom King Josiah turns for confirmation of a religious scroll's authenticity, is one such role model. In this story "nobody bats an eyelash at taking the scroll to a woman for authentication" (Sampson 18). Phoebe is a New Testament female character who the book of Romans describes as a "'leader,' 'president,' 'superintendent,' or 'patron'.' History records that Phoebe was a "businesswoman," a "deacon," a "theologian," a "rhetorician," and a "diplomat" (Finger "Phoebe" 5-7). Priscilla, Aquilla, and Nympha are other seldom recognized New Testament women leaders (Mollenkott Women 96-97). Finally, the Old Testament character of Ruth "points the way toward peaceful cohabitation" (Sigal 9).

One strategy evangelical Christian feminists use to establish authoritative interpretations of Scripture is the affirmation of women. This strategy expedites the development of a feminist interpretive code and provides specific instances of feminist biblical interpretation.

CONCLUSION: THE WORK OF INTERPRETATION

This essay demonstrates how evangelical feminists use a specific oppositional code to facilitate feminist biblical interpretation. The code is more than a specific interpretation of particular passages, for it provides Christian feminists a way to examine all of the Bible. Thus it lays the groundwork for the oppositional decoding of a wide range of texts.

Oppositional decoding requires more work than traditional decoding. Because the dominant tradition limits the polysemic potential of texts, audiences are likely to create readings consistent with established interpretations. Evangelical Christian feminists recognize this, but also affirm the possibility for reinterpretation. Trible explicitly states this conviction:

Reinterpretation characterizes this [feminist] hermeneutic. It recognizes the varied meanings of a text, but does not make the Bible say anything one wants. Some interpretations assert themselves forcibly; others have to be teased out. Reinterpretation also recognizes diversity. Despite past and present attempts at harmonization, the Bible remains full of contradictions. It resists the captivity of any one perspective. (5)
Evangelical feminist literature provides an oppositional code that makes reinterpretation easier. In so doing it creates a sense of religious community characterized by feminist readings of the Bible.

This sense of community encourages oppositional decoding. Everyone "recodes" messages with which they disagree, "but it is the group, in its own communication, that publicly challenges preferred readings, uncovering hidden structures, implicit mythologies, and naturalized ideological operations, albeit within the framework of its own structures, mythologies, and ideology" (Steiner 3). A community that values resistant readings must make oppositional patterns of interpretation "socially available to the reader" (Brummett 73). Evangelical feminist literature illustrates how oppositional codes are articulated and applied within texts of a particular social group.

This analysis of dominant and oppositional codes in evangelical Christianity illustrates how a social group's discourse influences the substance of one's religious beliefs, the definition of spiritual experiences, and the attribution of spiritual authority. Those who identify with the dominant evangelical tradition experience spirituality differently than those who identify with the evangelical feminist community.

This essay also contributes to critical theories of rhetoric. One on-going discussion concerns whether meanings are located in texts or in audiences. Wolfe and Carragee demonstrate that contemporary critical studies privilege audiences and slight texts in their discussions of meaning creation. Critics should attend both to texts and to audiences' interpretive activities. Attention to texts helps to illumine how powerful interests and traditions inscribe and thus advocate dominant meanings; attention to audiences helps to illumine how oppositional communities and movements reinterpret and thus challenge those dominant meanings.

A second on-going discussion concerns discourse created to interpret other discourse (Mailloux). The study of such "interpretive communication" can illumine the hermeneutic assumptions of social groups. For example: not only are the meanings of biblical texts different for traditional evangelicals and evangelical feminists, but the nature of those texts are different too. For the former group the texts are closed, for the latter they are open to various interpretations. A critical assessment of interpretive codes can uncover hermeneutic assumptions about "sacred" texts.

Future work might explore further the contributions discussed above: hegemony and opposition in religious discourse, the social dimensions of religious belief and spiritual experience, the interplay among texts and audiences in creating meaning, and the importance of hermeneutic assumptions in that interplay. Whatever direction such work takes, it should clarify how marginalized groups make oppositional
decoding easier and thus facilitate reinterpretation of prevalent judgments within the dominant tradition.

ENDNOTES

1. Some scholars distinguish between fundamentalists and evangelicals, but others such as Hunter and Marty do not. Marty calls any distinction "blurry" (Religion 376).
2. Several scholars note Swindoll, Christenson, and Dobson for their conservative positions on women's roles in family, church, and society. Hunter notes their influence in his chapter on women. Both Williams and Mollenkott (Women) cite Christenson for his anti-feminist views. The Christian Booksellers Association typically lists Swindoll and Dobson as two of their best-selling authors (Owen).

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