

**Toward a Standpoint Hermeneutic:  
The Case of the Evangelical Gender Subordination Debate**

Landon Schnabel

Ph.D. student, Indiana University

**Abstract:** This paper has two goals, one descriptive and the other prescriptive. The descriptive goal is to introduce and describe standpoint theory—an epistemological framework from sociology—and describe how it relates to the current evangelical gender debates as well as historical slavery debates. The prescriptive goal is a call for theologians to consider adopting a standpoint hermeneutic, which would involve being more self-reflexive about power and privilege. Theologians using a standpoint hermeneutic would (1) work from the standpoint of the disadvantaged, (2) ground interpretations in personal interests and experience, (3) maintain a strategically diverse discourse, (4) create knowledge that empowers the disadvantaged, (5) and include voices from as many social locations as possible in the project of religious knowledge generation.

**Keywords:** gender, religion, standpoint theory, hermeneutics, epistemology

*Individuals always started, and always start, from themselves. Their relations are the relations of their real life. How does it happen that their relations assume an independent existence over against them? And that the forces of their own life overpower them?*

-Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1973 [1845])

This paper has two goals, one descriptive and the other prescriptive. The descriptive goal is to introduce and describe standpoint theory—an epistemological framework from sociology—and describe how it relates to the current evangelical gender debates as well as historical slavery debates. The prescriptive goal is a call for theologians to consider

adopting a standpoint hermeneutic, which would involve being more self-reflexive about power and privilege.

Many arguments, theological or otherwise, can never go anywhere because people cannot agree on what counts as a source of authority. But even coming to an agreement on a shared source of authority does not mean that conflict ceases. Two people can look at the same agreed-upon source of authority—e.g., the Bible—and arrive at different conclusions based upon their social location and lived experiences. In these situations, a conversation about epistemology and hermeneutics would likely be more fruitful than having two opposing groups of people amass long lists of texts that support their position.

Christians, and especially evangelicals, agree on the Bible as a source having some level of authority, but come to vastly different political stances on issues such as gender, sexuality, immigration, war, and social welfare depending on the viewpoint from which they interpret it.<sup>1</sup> Arguments in which one or more sides appeal to religious authority are some of the most hotly debated and difficult to resolve. Fortunately, the sociology of knowledge—and a critical sociological theory in particular (standpoint theory)—may prove useful for helping theologians better understanding these debates, and why it is that people can come to completely different interpretations of the same text. This article uses current evangelical gender subordination debates, as well as historical slavery debates, to illustrate sites where standpoint theory could benefit hermeneutics.

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<sup>1</sup> Religious polarization on social issues became particularly salient after evangelicalism—which had previously taken a more separatist approach—began taking a more active role in secular politics in the 1970s (Schnabel 2013b, 2014b).

### **Knowledge, Power, and Standpoint Theory**

Post-modernism—and the related theories of post-structuralism and pure social constructionism—problematized Enlightenment notions of knowledge as universal, certain, and free of bias. The primary epistemological options available after the problematization of traditional notions of knowledge are relativism—which is precarious both for people who want to argue that something is true and those who want to argue that something is good or just—or revised empiricist/realist approaches, such as critical realism and standpoint theory (Sprague 2005).

Pure relativism makes it impossible to determine whether one discourse—a version of the way things are—is better than another (Schnabel 2014a, Schnabel and Breitwieser Forthcoming, Sprague 2005). Many see pure relativism as a dead end and so have developed epistemologies in response to relativism. One option that has become particularly popular among theists is critical realism: a reality exists external to our thinking, and there are consistent patterns in the way it works, but our perceptions of it are limited and vary from person to person (López and Potter 2005, Losch 2009, Collier 1994, Meyer 1989, Snell 2006, Wright 2013, Hartwig and Morgan 2012, McGrath 2003, 2006). In other words, we see through a glass darkly.

Critical realism recognizes that, how one person understands reality is not how another person understands it, and therefore sees the relationship between knower and known as socially mediated. Critical realists accept that our knowledge does not perfectly mirror reality and that the culturally informed subjectivities of knowers influence their interpretations of reality. Although recognizing that biases limit our knowledge, critical realism does not “call us to ask if there is something systematic and social to the nature of

biases of knowledge” (Sprague 2005). Standpoint theory, on the other hand, argues that there are “systematic biases toward the interests, experience, and forms of subjectivity of the privileged” built into discourses (Sprague 2005).

### **Standpoint Theory**

A standpoint is a location from which the world is understood, a position from which objects, such as a religious text, are perceived and according to which they are evaluated and interpreted.<sup>2</sup> Standpoint theory asserts that power and knowledge are closely related and that objects are constituted through an apparatus of power (Collins 1986, 2000, Intemann 2010, Smith 1974, 1987). There is an objective reality that can be understood through subjectivities, but our perceptions of reality are distorted by power. Power functions both explicitly and subtly, mask social inequalities by means of discourses that naturalize stratification, and determine which groups’ versions of reality count. Whenever groups come into conflict, whoever is best able to legitimate their ideas “win,” and their definition of reality become the definition of reality.

Invisible power dynamics are more efficacious in maintaining social relations than explicit dominance. Invisible power, or hegemony, has three characteristics: (1) social arrangements, which are in the best interests of the dominant group, are perceived to be in the best interest of everyone, (2) ideologies are taken for granted, and (3) social cohesion and cooperation occur where there would otherwise be conflict (Gramsci 1971, Komter 1989, Pyke 1996). Precisely because taken-for-granted knowledge starts from the perspective of the dominant group, standpoint theory is often needed as a corrective.

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<sup>2</sup> Though I speak about a standpoint as a perspective from which the world is viewed for the sake of simplicity, a standpoint is not exactly the same as an individual perspective. It is more of a political situating of knowledge in the experiences of people at intersecting social locations.

Standpoint theorists have set forth a concept called strong objectivity, suggesting a way to arrive at a less biased understanding of reality. Sandra Harding (1991) has argued that starting from the lived experiences of those who have been marginalized will lead to more objective knowledge. This conceptualization of standpoint theory makes three general epistemological claims: (1) Knowledge is socially situated and a person will typically see what someone like her/him would be expected to see; (2) marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that give them a perspective different from that of dominant groups, making them aware of issues dominants may not consider; (3) research on power relations should start with the lived experience of the marginalized.

Joey Sprague (2005) has suggested that, rather than using only the positionality of the marginalized to develop a stronger objectivity, we need to bridge boundaries and try to take into account as many perspectives as possible. Sprague sets forth four principles for developing knowledge that is more valid and just: (1) work from the standpoint of the disadvantaged, (2) ground interpretations in personal interests and experience, (3) maintain a strategically diverse discourse, and (4) create knowledge that empowers the disadvantaged. Similarly, Harding's (2008) more recent work has argued that we can arrive at more valid knowledge if we include more people in the knowledge production process, especially those who have been traditionally excluded, such as women and those in post-colonial contexts.

This version of standpoint—by recognizing how social structures shape the perspectives of different groups, and taking into account multiple discourses—differs from the narrower notion of naively taking the perspective of a marginalized group. Scholars can seek to understand the perspectives of both the marginalized and the privileged in light of a

sociological understanding of their positionality within social structures. They should then also turn the same critical lens onto their own social location, to develop a critical—and hopefully more valid—knowledge that, while imperfect, can prove useful (Sprague 2005).

### **Standpoint Theory and the Development of Theological Knowledge**

Because theology tends to be done by people in positions of power and authority—who are typically members of one or more privileged social categories (such as male, heterosexual, Western, white, middle-class, abled, and educated)—standpoint epistemology suggests that it is particularly important that exegesis of one's personal biography and interests be conducted prior to scriptural hermeneutics. Furthermore, the lived experience of marginalized groups should be taken into account as an interpretive lens to correct the default perspective of the powerful.

It is hard to give up privilege, and privileged groups—who typically hold the highest positions of power and are the gatekeepers of knowledge production—find it in their interest to maintain their privilege (Acker 2006, Reskin 1988). When faced with the possibility of social change, privileged groups often rewrite the rules, sometimes unconsciously, to adapt and re-inscribe social hierarchies onto a changing world (Reskin 1988, Ridgeway and Correll 2004). Although there is an evangelical feminist movement and growing numbers of women theologians, and although women make up more of the membership in Christian churches (Schnabel Forthcoming), men continue to predominate in positions of ecclesial authority and knowledge production (Cochran 2005, Braude 2008, Brekus 2007). Most theologians—who act as the determiners of the accepted discourses—

on both sides of the subordination debate are privileged white heterosexual men.<sup>3</sup> Many of these scholars do not seem to recognize that power and knowledge cannot be separated (Foucault 1978). Failing to give sufficient attention to “structures of inequality and exploitation,” (Collins 1998) these theologians continue to believe that convincing the other side of (their version of) the “truth” is the solution to resolving the debate. However, standpoint—rather than as yet insufficiently articulated universal, necessary, and certain “truth”—is at the base of the disagreement (Schnabel 2013a).

In order to dismantle taken-for-granted circumstances, the particular discourse supporting them must be made visible—or problematized (Lorber 1994). According to Pierre Bourdieu (1977). Undisputed knowledge—that which is taken-for-granted, coming about when “the natural and social world appears as self-evident”—can be problematized by recognizing it as the ways things have come to be, but not what must be. The first step towards change is recognizing previously undisputed knowledge as simply that which is commonly accepted, but not what has to be. Feminism demonstrated that patriarchy, although commonly accepted, was not the only option for social relations. This problematization sparked debates between orthodoxy (the “right” perspective, which was previously undisputed) and heterodoxy (the “wrong” perspective, which challenges orthodoxy) (Schnabel 2013a).

### **The Evangelical Subordination Debate as a Demonstrative Case**

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<sup>3</sup> Evangelical theologians in general tend to be middle-class heterosexual white men, but this is particularly the case in the evangelical subordination debate. The most prominent scholars on both sides of the issue (Knight, Grudem, Piper, Frame, Letham, Ware, Giles, Knight, Bilezikian, and others) are white men from privileged regions, such as the United States, Europe, and Australia.

In response to second-wave feminism, evangelical theologians developed an innovative theological discourse in an attempt to re-legitimate patriarchy.<sup>4</sup> Not all evangelicals, however, accepted these new ideas. In their debates over gender roles, hierarchicalist and egalitarian evangelical scholars have appealed to the Bible and their doctrine of the Trinity, developed complex theological arguments, and grounded their gender ideologies in unequivocal interpretations (Schnabel 2013a).<sup>5</sup> A hermeneutical standoff has ensued, and both evangelical groups—who give primacy to the Bible for resolving doctrinal disputes—believe they are interpreting the Bible correctly, even while contradicting one another (Giles 2002, Erickson 2009, Giles 2012).

When using an exegetical hermeneutic, theologians recognize the importance of reading out of the text rather than reading themselves into it. Standpoint theory, however, suggests that, because power and knowledge are intimately related, a prior step is needed (Smith 1974, 1987, Intemann 2010, Sprague 2005, Harding 1991, 2008, 2009, 2011, Kourany 2009, Harding 2004, Collins 1986, 2000, Haraway 1988). Because of the often invisible nature of power, theologians would be wise to recognize their social location and interpret self before interpreting religious texts. Using the evangelical subordination debate as a demonstrative case, I argue theology would do well to move toward what I call a standpoint hermeneutic.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Definition of re-legitimate: to make previously implicitly assumed ideas taken-for-granted again following challenges to naturalness.

<sup>5</sup> *Hierarchicalists* believe there are differing levels of authority between the Trinitarian Father and Son and between men and women, asserting that the relationships are functionally hierarchical in their essence. *Egalitarians* believe there is equal authority in the two relationships.

<sup>6</sup> Liberation theologians are already using somewhat similar methods, but standpoint theory/epistemology—developed in sociology and gender studies—would nicely supplement work already being done on interpretation from the margins (Schillebeeckx, 1990, 1995; Dussell, 1985, 2003; Tracy, 1981, 1994; Fiorenza, 1992, 1997, 2013).



A standpoint hermeneutic would start from an epistemology that recognizes that we understand things imperfectly, acknowledges that our knowledge is particularly situated, and grapples with our systematic biases that further marginalize already disadvantaged groups. After developing this sort of epistemology, actually working with a standpoint hermeneutic would involve (1) doing theology with the standpoint of the disadvantaged in mind, (2) explicitly recognizing our own interests and experiences—as well as those of others—before and while interpreting, (3) purposefully and strategically involving a diverse group of people in the development of theological knowledge, and (4) using theology to empower the disadvantaged.

### **Historical Context of the Subordination Debate**

Before embarking on a knowledge production process using a standpoint hermeneutic, critical knowledge producers should first understand the social and historical context in which contemporary power relations and knowledge developed. According to social scientists (Connell 1987) *and* theologians (Fiorenza 2013); interpreting social relations as natural, suppresses their historicity and contributes to continued oppression. Historical context is crucial to understanding the current evangelical gender debate, especially because the debate has largely neglected historicity in its search for ahistorical truth. Throughout Christian history, a patriarchal discourse and highly differentiated hierarchical roles for women and men were the relatively unchallenged norm. Apart from intermittent works by proto-feminists, religiously justified subordination went largely unquestioned until the rise of feminism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Lerner 1993). Feminisms, or resistant discourses that problematized patriarchy, changed the

conditions for patriarchy's defense, leading to conflicts and contradictions in evangelical gender discourses (Griffith 1997, Gallagher 2003, Edgell 2006, Bartkowski 2001). Rather than provide the entire history (on patriarchal gender teachings and relations throughout Christian history, see MacHaffie 2006, DeConick 2011, Schnabel 2013a), I will start with religious responses to the first two waves of feminism.

### **The Rise of Feminisms, Evangelical and Otherwise**

In the first wave of feminism—which sought women's suffrage in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century—some progressive Christians were supportive of the movement, whereas precursors to modern evangelicalism were typically opposed to it and penned fervent words against the suffragist movement. In 1913, the editor of an evangelical periodical entitled *Our Hope* wrote: “Woman leaving her sphere, becomes by it an instrument of Satan. . . . Corruption of the vilest kind must follow” (quoted in DeBerg 2000). Suffragists were called “unsexed solecisms” and even labeled “demon-possessed and criminal”:

These Satanic instruments seem to stop short of nothing. Like their master, who is a murderer from the beginning, they may resort to poison and destroy human life. It is significant how Satan uses women in these closing days of our age. . . . He goads them on to perpetrate these wicked actions. Woe unto this world when they get the leadership they desire (quoted in DeBerg 2000).

Although some progressive Christians, and even a few evangelicals (Hardesty 1999), had championed early iterations of feminism, it was not until second-wave feminism that a substantial number of evangelicals joined the cause for equality (Schnabel 2013a). When they did, however, many of these egalitarian evangelicals regarded equality as a divine mandate (Cochran 2005).

During the second-wave of feminism, egalitarian sentiments made significant inroads into evangelicalism and led to the development of an organized evangelical feminist movement that would come to inspire theological backlash (Cochran 2005, Stasson 2014). In 1973, reformist evangelicals met at a Chicago YMCA to formulate a progressive evangelical agenda. Although only six women were invited to the conference, they were able to champion a feminist statement for inclusion in the Chicago Declaration: “We acknowledge that we have encouraged men to prideful domination and women to irresponsible passivity. So we call both men and women to mutual submission and active discipleship” (Swartz 2011).

In 1975, two years after the Chicago meeting, 360 evangelical feminists convened for a meeting in Washington, D.C. Evangelical feminists there endorsed the Equal Rights Amendment and launched the Evangelical Women’s Caucus, purposing to raise consciousness about women’s rights issues from a conservative Protestant perspective (Quebedeaux 1978). Summing up the sentiments of many evangelical feminists, Virginia Mollenkott, one of the pioneers of evangelical feminism, declared, “We did not become feminists and then try to fit our Christianity into feminist ideology. We heralded the feminist movement because we were convinced that the church had strayed from a correct understanding of God’s will for women” (Alsdurf 1978). When evangelical feminists organized and began developing feminist interpretations of the Bible, evangelicals committed to hierarchy reacted (Stasson 2014).<sup>7</sup>

### **The New Theological Legitimation of Hierarchical Gender Relations**

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<sup>7</sup> For more on evangelical feminism, see Cochran (2005) and Schnabel (2013a).

Evangelical theologians developed an innovative response to the growing feminist movement within evangelicalism (Cochran 2005, Stasson 2014). Though they were likely motivated by a desire to uphold what they saw as true biblical teachings, I argue that their social location impacted their interpretation in predictable ways. Separating equality of being and authority—and therefore paying lip service to equality while preserving the social order of headship—George Knight III, a theologian and president of the Evangelical Theological Society, set a precedent for future evangelical discussions of gender and the Trinity by appropriating the term *role* from the social sciences (Giles 2002, 2008).

In a watershed 1977 book titled *The New Testament Teaching on the Role Relationship of Men and Women*, Knight formulated a new different-authority-but-equal-value theological argument to bolster traditional gender roles while denying any implication of a lower valuing of women. The first to make such an argument, Knight (1977) combined elements of feminism (equal value) with patriarchy (hierarchical roles) via the idea of “Trinitarian headship”: “For the basis of man’s headship and woman’s submission, the apostle Paul appeals to the analogy of God the Father’s headship over Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 11:3).” According to Knight, Jesus and the Father were equal, but had unalterably different roles of authority and subordination; likewise, women and men were different but equal. Knight (1977) believed the Bible had anticipated the gender revolution and that 1 Corinthians 11:3 (“God is the head of Christ”) was “given to answer the objection some bring to the headship of man in reference to woman,” with a comparable relationship of equal *being* but eternally subordinate *role* between women and men and between the Son and the Father in the Christian Trinity.

Knight continued to cultivate his theory (Knight and Grudem 1985), and linkages between gender and the Trinity have been widely promulgated and debated in the evangelical academic community ever since (Giles 2006). Central to the popularization of these ideas among evangelical theologians was Knight's protégé, Wayne Grudem. Grudem founded both the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood and its affiliated *Journal of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*. He co-edited *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Piper and Grudem 1991), which won a Book of the Year award from evangelicalism's flagship magazine, *Christianity Today*. Moreover, Grudem (1994) wrote what is, according to Kevin Giles (2006), the most widely used textbook in North American and most other English-speaking Protestant seminaries worldwide: *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*.<sup>8</sup>

Other influential authors who explain gender subordination via the Trinity include Bruce Ware (2005), author of *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance*; Robert Letham (2004), who wrote *The Holy Trinity*; John Frame (2002), who penned *The Doctrine of God*; and John Piper, who coauthored *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* with Grudem (Piper and Grudem 2006). Illustrating the socially situated nature of discourses, a number of the most prominent American proponents of subordinationism, including Knight, Grudem, Letham, and Frame, were all trained at Westminster Theological Seminary (Giles 2006).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, Millard Erickson (1998), a prominent theologian on the other side of the debate, wrote the second most used systematic theology textbook.

<sup>9</sup> Westminster is a Presbyterian seminary. By some classification schemes Presbyterians are mainline, rather than evangelical Protestants. However, Westminster's website (wts.edu) makes it clear that they promote biblicism. Furthermore, authors trained at Westminster, along with others who engage in this debate, typically use the term evangelical and both CBMW (Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood) and CBE (Christians for Biblical Equality) were founded by leaders who considered themselves evangelicals. Articles

This new discourse linked gender roles and eternal Trinitarian roles. According to Giles (2006), Knight's 1977 work "formulated an entirely new set of theological arguments in support of the permanent subordination of women. Men and women are created equal, yet women are differentiated from men by the fact that God has assigned to them a subordinate *role*." Giles (2002) makes it clear that in prior centuries, theologians agreed that the Bible depicted women as a class or race inferior to men because of the chronological order in which they were created by God: man was created first, and therefore men are superior. Woman was created second, and therefore women are inferior. In the contemporary hierarchical case for role subordination, the argument is grounded in a constitutive and prescriptive *social order* based on the Trinity and passed on to humans at creation. Attempting to re-legitimize traditional gender roles, evangelicals have re-problematized the Trinity, distinguishing between functional and ontological equality. By doing so, they reopened arguments that had been largely settled in the 4<sup>th</sup> century Nicene Creed (Erickson 2009).

Egalitarians became concerned that hierarchicalists were re-inventing or tampering with the evangelical doctrine of the Trinity for the sake of maintaining prescriptive hierarchical gender roles (Bilezikian 1997, Erickson 2009, Giles 2002, 2006, 2008). Ideological conflict ensued. Theological rivals established opposing organizations in the late 1980s, the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) and Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE), both with associated journals. The CBMW's *Journal of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* has set forth a position of eternal role subordination, whereas

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and books on this topic whose titles explicitly label the subordination debate as evangelical include Giles (2006), Grudem (2004, 2006a, and 2006b), and Piper and Grudem (1991).

CBE's *Priscilla Papers* has argued for equal authority. CBMW was formed in 1987, following a call for an organization promoting hierarchical relations given by Wayne Grudem at the 1986 meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, just one year after the publishing of the book he co-authored with Knight (Knight and Grudem 1985). In 1987, evangelical egalitarians started *Priscilla Papers* out of concern for women being excluded from ministry, and then established CBE in early 1988. Since then, each group has held conferences and continued to publish papers and books arguing for their side of the debate (Cochran 2005).

Egalitarians and hierarchicalists have both proclaimed their perspectives as biblical truth and developed elaborate systems of texts to argue their position (Erickson 2009). The two sides of this debate don't differ what counts as the source of the authority—they agree it is the Bible. But both sides read the Bible according to their own experiences, interests, and resulting standpoints. The ongoing debate illustrates that our standpoint shapes our interpretation. But theologians embroiled in the kerfuffle continue to focus on determining ahistorical “truth.” They are attempting to speak from an “Archimedean point”—“that is, a point external to any particular position in society”—rather than first doing an exegesis of their own experiences and interests (Smith 1987). The structure and content of thought, however, cannot be separated from its historical context and the material forces at work in the lives of the generators of knowledge (Berger and Luckmann 1966, Collins 1986). In short, knowledge and power cannot be separated (Foucault 1978). By seeking to determine the absolute truth about gender—typically from a privileged, essentialist, and biologically determinist perspective—many theologians on both sides of the debate uncritically place

themselves at the center of the knowledge universe rather than recognizing the systematic biases that shapes their interpretation of reality.

When these sorts of debates arise, theologians would be well served by stepping back and discussing hermeneutics—rather than collecting more texts to support their perspective. This does not automatically lead to the liberative standpoint hermeneutic I propose, but it does suggest that the standpoint from which theologians interpret the Bible shapes their resulting theology.

Although readers may disagree about whether we should interpret from the standpoint of the oppressed in the case of the gender debates—because they are still ongoing—most will probably agree that theologians involved in the next case would have benefitted from more self-reflection about power and privilege.

### **A Further Demonstrative Case: Slavery**

The evangelical gender subordination debate provides a contemporary illustration of the potential of a standpoint hermeneutic, but is not the first, and will not be the last time that religiously-justified hierarchy can and should be challenged. Slavery provides a previous illustration. It was accepted as simply the way things were until abolitionists showed that slavery, which is condoned in the Bible, is unjust (Giles 2002).

Hierarchicalists—those who sought to defend the *status quo* in response to those seeking social change—developed a theology of slavery and presented it as biblical truth and thus irrefutable. For Charles Hodge (1860a)—principal of Princeton Theological Seminary and an important figure for later evangelicals—slavery was natural and instated by God: “If the present course of the abolitionists is right, then the course of Christ and the



apostles [was] wrong;" to consider slavery unjust is "a direct impeachment of the Word of God."

Hodge (1860b) believed his contemporary social order was divinely established. He wrote on the *Haustafel* (scriptural household order codes): "Order and subordination pervade the whole universe, and is essential to its being. . . . If this concatenation be disturbed in any of its parts, ruin must be the result." Albert Bledsoe (1856,) concurred:

The history of interpretation furnishes no examples of more willful and violent perversions of the sacred text than are found in the writings of the Abolitionists. They seem to consider themselves above the Scriptures: and when they put themselves above the Law of God, it is not wonderful that they should disregard the laws of men. Significant manifestations of the result of this disposition to consider their own light a surer guide than the Word of God, are visible in the anarchical opinions about human governments, civil and ecclesiastical, and on the rights of women, which have found appropriate advocates in the abolition publications. Let these principles be carried out and there is an end to all social subordination.

These statements illustrate the passion with which traditionalists defended the orthodoxy that reinforced their privilege.

Race and gender categories are similarly constructed (Glenn 2000, Collins 2000) and racism and sexism are culturally (Ridgeway 2011) and hermeneutically related (Giles 2002). Both racist and sexist ideologies treat subordinated groups as *others* who lack full human subjectivity (Collins 1986). Building on standpoint theory, research on gender has taken an intersectional turn, focusing on the ways that gender, race, class, and other systems of oppression intersect (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013, Collins 2000, Crenshaw 1991, Fiorenza 2013, McCall 2005). According to Giles (2002, 215), "contemporary hierarchical-complementarians want to completely separate the discussion on slavery from the discussion on women, but this is not possible" because of close parallels; "both the

Old and New Testaments accept slavery and the subordination of women as facts of life without direct criticism.” In the Bible, the subordination of slaves and women were often connected, with the household codes applying similarly to women and slaves.

Although egalitarian theologians have recently embraced the connection between race and gender (Giles 2002), Harriet Martineau (Martineau 1837, Martineau and Logan 2002) comparatively analyzed slavery and the position of women in the Western world a quarter of a century before the American Civil War. Connecting race and gender from the hierarchicalist perspective, Bledsoe (1856), one of the anti-abolitionists quoted above, sought to discredit abolitionists’ anti-slavery arguments by drawing a parallel to their views on women’s rights: their arguments about both slaves and women, he said, were “anarchical.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Hodge (1860a) argued that slavery was logical because you would not treat child-like “vicious savages” or women as full humans who can be responsible for their own governance: “In this country, we believe that the general good requires us to deprive the whole female sex of the right of self-government. They have no voice in the formation of the laws which dispose of their persons or property. When married, we despoil them almost entirely of legal existence.”

Theologians accepted slavery until abolitionists problematized it. Pro-slavery theologians had neglected the power dynamics of slavery—considering those they enslaved to be less developed as humans than they were—and accepted it as the way things were meant to be. Of these theologians, Giles (2002) wrote that interpretation “through the eyes of self-interest led them astray” and that their understanding of the “Bible blinded them from seeing the evil of slavery.” If personal interests and the

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<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that not all abolitionists were in favor of women’s rights.

standpoint of the oppressed had been considered in biblical interpretation, theologians who supported slavery may have instead used the Bible, as some did, to advocate abolition. Once the relationship between power and knowledge was recognized in the slavery case, theologians stopped using the Bible to defend slavery.<sup>11</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In the evangelical gender subordination debate, both sides agree on the authoritative text to use when arguing their perspective. Yet both sides believe that their theological opponents are fumbling in the dark. Both sides tend to say the people who disagree with them are ruled by cultural bias. They argue that their opponents are using a small number of texts in opposition to the majority of texts that support the biblical position. Both sides argue that the others' presuppositions are coming from the culture in which they operate, claiming that their subsequent interpretations are socially, rather than logically or divinely, determined (Erickson 2009, Giles 2002).<sup>12</sup> When hermeneutical standoffs like the gender subordination and slavery debates arise, they demonstrate the potential value of a standpoint hermeneutic, which highlights the importance of taking the perspective of others, understanding the social location of those generating theological knowledge, and considering the social implications for those affected by that knowledge.

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<sup>11</sup> Similar to parallels drawn by Giles (2002) and others between slavery and women's subordination, parallels have also been drawn between support for anti-miscegenation laws and opposition to same-sex marriage in the United States. Powell et al. (2010) have shown that the religious and demographic profiles of those who opposed interracial marriage in the early 1970s are very similar to those who are opposed to same-sex couples.

<sup>12</sup> It will be helpful to recognize that presuppositions are not necessarily deleterious unless they inhibit critical thought and reflection. In fact, presuppositions and habitualization are necessary foundations upon which humans operate. Without any habitualization, we would be cognitively overwhelmed by social encounters (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

This article introduced standpoint theory to theology, and described two cases—the current gender debates and the historical slavery debate—that illustrate why this approach could be helpful when purportedly absolute, yet contradictory, truths collide. The proposed standpoint hermeneutic would recognize and seek to understand how “systematic biases toward the interests, experience, and forms of subjectivity of the privileged” are built into theological discourses (Sprague 2005). Standpoint interpreters seeking to generate religious knowledge would (1) work from the standpoint of the disadvantaged, (2) ground interpretations in personal interests and experience, (3) maintain a strategically diverse discourse, (4) create knowledge that empowers the disadvantaged, (5) and include as many voices from as many social locations as possible in the project of religious knowledge generation (Sprague 2005, Harding 2008). Regardless of whether my proposed standpoint hermeneutic catches on, I hope this paper will stimulate future conversations about how power and privilege influence hermeneutics.

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