The loaded term "postmodernism" covers a vast conceptual terrain, which I shall not attempt to traverse in this essay.1 But one salient feature of various forms of postmodernist thought is the rejection of truth as that which corresponds to an objective and knowable reality. Truth is constructed, not discovered. Many postmodernists take this notion not to entail skepticism or nihilism, but instead to be an idea with great social potential for good. I will explore and critique this constructivist claim as it relates to race and gender. Then I will sketch a biblical perspective that answers the concerns for justice voiced by postmodernists, but which does so according to a biblical world view that honors and defends objective truth instead of dismissing it as intrinsically oppressive. I will also address and oppose the often-heard notion that evangelical egalitarianism is a covert and insidious form of postmodernism. The postmodernist destabilization and redescription of truth often poses as a form of liberation from racial and gender oppression. "Truth," they claim, has been used to subjugate women and minorities by muzzing and marginalizing them according to categories that are really no more than reifications or social fictions. Foucault said, that

which categorizes the individual...attaches him to (an) identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him.... (This) is a form of power which makes individuals subjects.2

This superimposition of categories is what made blacks slaves; what made women second-rate citizens in a man's world; what fueled white imperialism worldwide for centuries; and what continues to hinder many minorities and women from appropriate social attainment. This purported "law of truth" stigmatizes homosexu-

---

Douglas Groothuis is an associate professor of philosophy at Denver Seminary in Denver, Colorado.

THE ASBURY THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL
FALL 1999 • VOL. 54 • NO. 2
als, lesbians, and bisexuals as "abnormal," "deviant," and "sinful." Zygmunt Bauman tersely states what he takes to be the essential fault of this kind of thinking to be: "The target of certainty and of absolute truth was indistinguishable from the crusading spirit and the project of domination." The idea of a fixed truth about race and gender is the culprit, the engine of domination. As William Simon put it,

A quest for some seemingly permanent objective guide to human uses of gender tends to reveal little more than a history of historically specific human uses. The quest for a comprehensive species-wide "truth" only reveals a rapidly expanding pluralization of gender "truths."  

In the shadow of rigid and oppressive gender stereotypes and in the presence of various liberation movements striving to give voice to the concerns of the sexually marginalized, postmodernists believe that a new model of gender must be forged, one that realizes that "gender identity is not so much a thing as a continuing process of negotiation—not only between the individual and the world, but also between different constructions of the self." Anderson claims that the global women's movement is powerful precisely because it has made "one of the most fundamental and revolutionary discoveries people have ever made: That any society's customs are constructions of reality." Since they were invented under various conditions, they can be reinvented when the time comes. Women's gender identities are a process of construction and deconstruction, invention and reinvention, with little if any mooring to transcultural realities. Anderson grants that there are certain sexual givens of the male and female body, but norms of behavior and interpretations of sexual identity are matters of socially constructed gender. The culture gives and the culture takes away; nothing is permanent. 'For the postmodernist, there is no true self.'

These postmodernist claims are daunting issues because of their complexity and consequence. In this article I will consider how the postmodernist view of race and gender is at odds with the biblical account of truth. However, I will also argue that the concept of reification, or social construction, can be a useful conceptual tool for analysis from a Christian perspective. Christians have often succumbed to the worship of ideological idols, or reifications, which have put women and minorities into false and constricting molds not justified by Scripture.

**Truth, Race, and Gender**

Everyone should celebrate the fact that women and minorities are finding a more confident and courageous voice in Western cultures. Scripture affirms that all people are equally made in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26), that God is no respecter of persons (Acts 10:34), that God deeply cares about those who have been oppressed and abandoned, that Jesus' disciples should not show favoritism (James 2:1), and that the gospel message must be brought to people of every racial and ethnic group (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8-9). However, giving voice to people who have been silenced or muffled does not entail that they will always speak the truth. Both oppressed and oppressors are, in the biblical vision, sinners in need of forgiveness and intellectual/moral reorientation by the Word and the Spirit. We all need large transfusions of objective truth from God to off-
set our proclivities to self-justification, exonerating, blame-shifting, stereotyping, and so on. But an objective orientation to truth is a vanishing value in postmodernity.

Thomas Sowell, a wise and rigorous social analyst, comments on the fact that readers thanked columnist Anna Quindlen for "speaking our truth" on a particular matter. "However lofty and vaguely poetic such words may seem, the cold fact is that the truth cannot become private property without losing its whole meaning." This is because truth "is honored precisely for its value in interpersonal communication." If we relativize truth to individuals or special interest groups, we would be more honest "to stop using the word or the concept and recognize that nobody's words could be relied upon anymore." By making truth the particular possession of oppressed groups we insure that "we should arbitrarily single out some group for different standards, according to the fashions of the times." When truth is reduced to a fashion statement, it has no binding force or persuasive power. The apprehension of truth decays when relativized to certain culturally anointed groups; only a pathetic plethora of opinions remains.

No one owns or controls truth, although opinion is shaped in many ways. Sowell cites John Adams' comment: "Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence." Truth is neither pigmented nor gendered. There is no "black truth" or "white truth" or "red truth" or "gay truth" or "women's truth" or "male truth." Truth is a property of only those propositions and beliefs that match objective reality; it matters not who utters them, where they are uttered, or why they are uttered. The real questions of moral order fall along these lines: Who is speaking the truth? What are the social and ethical consequences of truth and of falsity? What rights do all people deserve? How should particular groups be treated with love and justice? Everyone deserves to be heard; sadly, society has not always allowed women and minorities that voice, despite their First Amendment rights. Yet not all voices speak truthfully or reasonably. We must distinguish between the importance of free voices and truthful speech.

Arthur Schlesinger, a well-respected senior historian, worries that groups who have not been adequately recognized in history tend to engage in "compensatory history" in order to get even for past offenses at the expense of objectivity and dialogue. One writer he cites, John Henrik Clarke, claims that "African scholars are the final authority on Africa," as if pigment and culture dictate truth. This is as wrong as saying that American scholars are the final authority on America. Some multicultural curricula approach history 'not as an intellectual discipline but rather as a social and psychological therapy whose primary purpose is to raise the self-esteem of children from minority groups.' The question of objective truth takes a back seat to narratives that supposedly empower beleaguered groups. But only the truth will ever set anyone free, not compensatory constructions lacking factual foundation and rational support.

Historian Gertrude Himmelfarb notes that the postmodernist writing of history makes it "an instrument for the struggle to power." The postmodernist historian...is the bearer of the class/race/gender war—or, rather, wars. "When history is used as a weapon to counterbalance past evils (real or supposed), it fails to focus on a real past and, instead, constructs a useable past for present political and cultural purposes. However, two wrongs don't make a right; and two lies don't make a truth. Postmodernist history-writing results in
a quandary; when the quest for objectivity is lost, and everyone is writing from a specific racial/ethnic/gender perspective radically different from and incommensurate with other perspectives, fairness and justice—professed postmodernist values—are necessarily ruled out.

Ironically, the postmodernist attempt to give a voice to the marginalized results in incompatible perspectives marginalizing other perspectives. As Himmelfarb notes, all “the ethnic, racial, religious, sexual, national, ideological, and other characteristics that distinguish people” are rendered divisive and serve only to politicize history. The “pernicious effect” of postmodernist history is to
demean and dehumanize the people who are the subjects of history. To pluralize and particularize history to the point where people have no history in common is to deny the common humanity of all people, whether their sex, race, class, religion. It is also to trivialize history by so fragmenting it that it lacks all coherence and focus, all sense of continuity—indeed all meaning.11

Postmodernists typically take this consequence as good, since it brings down “the totalizing, ‘universalizing,’ ‘logocentric,’ ‘phallocentric’ history that is said to be the great evil of modernity.”12 However, racial, gender, and ethnic fragmentation can hardly encourage mutual understanding, reconciliation, and civility that are so needed in our increasingly pluralistic, confusing, and antagonistic world.

Without the concept of a knowable objective truth concerning a reality independent of our biases, ignorance, and prejudices, history becomes a wax nose that can be twisted in any direction without regard for proper method, objective facts, or implications. All that remains is partisanship, ideology, power-mongering, image manipulation, name-calling, propaganda, and subversion. These are not the essential elements of equitable gender and racial relations.

It is beyond question that power and prejudice can and do corrupt our understanding of the truth about race and gender. They can even silence the voices of the oppressed and rob them of comfort, as the ancient Preacher noted:

I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun:
I saw the tears of the oppressed—
and they have no comforter;
power was on the side of their oppressors—
and they have no comforter (Eccles. 4:1).

Postmodernists face a daunting dilemma when it comes to matters of race and gender, given their views of truth and the self. On the one hand, postmodernists make truth the possession of various groups, fracturing truth into ethnic and gender conclave.13 On the other hand, postmodernists reject all forms of “essentialism,” the notion that there is an essential or given identity that is fundamental to any individual or social group. All identity, whether individual or collective, is contingently constructed and is not rooted in any objective reality beyond culture.

Anderson explains that the efforts of “earnest liberals” to preserve the distinct identity
of various ethnic groups "are biased in favor of an idea of the naturalness and timeless-ness of those cultures, blinkered against recognizing them as inventions that have been turned into things by the process of reification." Postmodernists cast off all essentialist notions. Rather, identity (along with every other abstract value or concept) is socially constructed by specific cultures and communities. Since any person normally moves in and out of a number of subcultures every day, postmodernist identity is not determined either by the individual or the group. Instead, identity is indeterminate and protean, and the postmodernist self is really much more self-involved than involved with any one social group. Thus postmodernism scuttles objective truth and furthers the fragmentation of individuals and communities that began with modernity." 

Scriptural Truth on Race and Gender

Christians should rise to the postmodernist occasion by articulating and incarnating a theology of race and gender equal to the task of creating a climate for rational discourse, civil exchange, and social justice. Without attempting to resolve the debates on affirmative action, the strengths and weaknesses of multiculturalism, and other highly charged political issues, I will give the rudiments of a biblical theology of race, gender, and identity that honors individual uniqueness, ethnic and gender identity, and objective truth. All three are indispensable.

The biblical metanarrative begins with God creating the universe by his Word (Gen. 1:1; 1 John 1:1-3; Heb. 1:2-3). The world is the expression of God's power and design. The Creator recognized the prehuman world to be good, and deemed humans, who were made in his image and likeness, to be "very good" (Gen. 1:26, 31). The first man and woman are the parents of us all, both in their original goodness and in their original sin. This couple was charged to procreate, to care for creation, and to cultivate it under God's guidance. However, both heeded the serpent's lie that the way of disobedience and autonomy was better than the way of obedience and blessing under God. This resulted in the fall of humans from their original state of goodness and social harmony. The world "east of Eden" is riddled with gender, racial, and class hostilities that are rooted not in God's original design for human flourishing, but in human rebellion (Genesis 3; Romans 3).

Humans of both genders and all races are equally sinful as well as equally created in God's image. Sin takes different forms in different cultures at different times, but women and men of all races have "fallen short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Gen. 3:16 teaches that after the fall, man will "rule over" woman. This is not God's moral command, but a consequence of sin having poisoned the world through human rebellion against God's character and commands. It is a description of the coarse contours of an alienated world in crying need of healing grace.

God has not placed one race above any other race. The supposed "curse of Ham" as applied to blacks has no basis in Scripture, but was derived from a text used out of context as a pretext for racism against blacks (Gen. 9:18-27). In his Mars Hill address, Paul states that from the first human God "made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole world; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places they should live." God did not make one nation superior to another. God's purpose was that "they should seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us"
(Acts 17:26-27). God's election of Israel was not because of their race or their strength or wisdom, but by God's grace alone, and through them all the nations of the world were to be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3).

God's redemptive plan brought Jesus to this sin-stained, tear-soaked, blood-caked planet to reconcile creatures to the Creator and to reconcile them one to another. The drama of the gospel's liberation began with the Jews, but quickly moved out to embrace the world. Jesus instructed his disciples to receive the Holy Spirit's power and to be his "witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The inclusion of Samaria is significant, since the Jews historically took the Samaritans to be racially and religiously contemptible. These barriers had already come down in Jesus' ministry (John 4) and had to be cleared away completely for the gospel to prosper. Patterns of prejudice and bigotry had to be broken. Jews and all Gentiles can find unity through the work of Jesus Christ (Acts 10; Eph. 2:11-22).

Moreover, men and women are released from the old social structures of domination and subservience through the life, death, and resurrection of the divine Messiah. Jesus said that his followers are not to dominate each other (as did the Gentiles), but rather to serve one another. He scandalized the establishment of his day through his respect for women demonstrated in many circumstances. Dorothy Sayers captures this poignantly:

Perhaps it is no wonder that women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man—there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never faltered or coaxed or patronized; who never made jokes about them, never treated them either as "the women, God help us!" or "The Ladies, God bless them!"; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no ax to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unself-conscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything "funny" about woman's nature.\(^\text{26}\)

The promise of the Kingdom involves both men and women filled with the Spirit and serving Christ (Acts 2:17-18; see also Joel 2:28-32). The new covenant, unlike the old, allows for no principled privileging of men over women as part of God's spiritual order. Paul enunciates this in his charter of Christian freedom for all peoples and both sexes. Here he speaks not merely of salvation, but of one's spiritual prerogatives and responsibilities in Christ:\(^\text{27}\)

You are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Gal. 3:26-28).
COLORIZING CHURCH HISTORY

Sadly, the voices of women and minorities have not always been heard in the Western Christian tradition. The oneness in Christ emphasized by Paul has often been neglected. This injustice should be rectified. Christians should not reject all multicultural concerns in an effort to guard against the "politically correct" ideology of postmodernists who abandon objective truth and paint Christianity as inherently oppressive and hegemonic. In 1992, historian Ruth Tucker wrote a provocative essay for Christianity Today called, "Colorizing Church History: A history that ignores women and minorities is a poor reflection of our Christian heritage." Without challenging the notions of objective truth, rationality, or the need for impartial evidence, Tucker asks why our accounts of church history are dominated by white men when, in fact, God has powerfully used women and people of other races to propagate, defend, and apply the gospel through the centuries.

Tucker notes that God often uses the weak and small things of the world for great purposes (Matt. 20:26; 1 Cor. 1:27-28). Thus Christians should recognize that "a history that focuses on those with prestige and position is not the fullest reflection of our Christian heritage—in that it is out of step with how God works in the world." She tries to rectify this somewhat by telling of Katherine Zell's forgotten role in the Reformation. Although excluded from the clergy, she preached in the streets of Strasbourg, wrote tracts, supervised a large refugee program, edited a hymnbook, and took a stand for religious toleration among orthodox Christians, even the often despised Anabaptists. Zell was not as influential as Luther or Calvin or other male reformers whose gender gave them opportunities unavailable to women of the time. However, "her ministry of servanthood—as Jesus defined servanthood—is worthy of recognition, and her stand against religious intolerance ought to serve as a model for Christians today."26

Our understanding of church history, and of all history, influences our views of ourselves and others. We are historical beings who need heroes to emulate (Hebrews 11). Those struggling for recognition and opportunity need strong role models, such as Zell, for inspiration. Tucker alerts us that "the standard list of great nineteenth century American revivalists invariably leaves off men and women of color." We hear much of Charles Finney's influence, but little of John Jasper, his African-American contemporary. Both had dramatic adult conversions, ministered for over half a century, and were recognized as powerful preachers who drew enthusiastic crowds. Jasper began a church in Richmond, Virginia, with nine members, which grew to over two thousand. Although he was a "great humanitarian and defender of the Bible...his story has been lost in obscurity."27

Tucker also writes of Samson Occum, a preacher and evangelist who ministered for over forty years in eighteenth-century New England and New York. He studied at a school that later became Dartmouth, ministered in England, and published a hymnal for his people. Why have we not more heard of him? Why is he omitted from Sydney Ahlstrom's well-respected work, A Religious History of the American People? Occum was a Mohegan Indian.28

Tucker issues this clarion challenge:

We need to re-examine the lens we use to view church history. Like the writers of Scripture, we need to focus on the significance of women, minorities, and those of various cultures. Only by using this more inclusive lens will we have any hope of
TRUTH

Groothuis

seeing the full spectacle of what God is accomplishing on earth through his church—and any hope of seeing him, and each other, more clearly.28

Tucker does not advocate a quota system for church history or a compensatory model that viliﬁes previous heroes (typically white males) to make room for new (nonwhite) ones. Rather, "Church history must be told anew—not to satisfy certain interest groups, but to capture the whole picture of the church and to listen to voices that have traditionally not been heard."29

TRUTH KNOWN AND SHARED ACROSS CULTURES

While we must retain the doctrines of biblical inspiration and the objective meaning of biblical texts, Christians ought to open up the discourse on theology, biblical studies, apologetics, and ethics to the global Christian community, male and female. The Body of Christ is multi-colored, multi-ethnic, and of both sexes. God is a global God, disclosing insights and teaching lessons to Christians around the world. The postmodern condition of expanded communications and travel allows us greater access to this rainbow of truth given to the church worldwide. There is nothing postmodernist about pursuing all of God's truth, as it is reﬂected through different peoples in different places.

Standard theological works should not be dispensed with because they are typically written by white, European males. (Saint Augustine, however, was from North Africa, and may have had dark skin.) Nor should minority voices always trump received opinion, simply because they are minority voices. We don't need an Hispanic theology, an African-American theology, an Asian-American theology as separate ﬁelds of study, any more than we need a white theology. True theology is the corpus of God's truth that is true for all, engaging for all, and needed by all. Christians should practice theology by discerning the proper application of God's objective, universal, and absolute truth to their particular cultural situation. Rather than any ethnocentric or male-centered or female-centered reading of Scripture, we need a theo-centric reading of Scripture that discerns how God's universal truth applies to all people and all cultures.30

Women and people of color will often bring different questions to the text of Scripture and, therefore, ﬁnd truths neglected or minimized by others. These truths are not constructed, but discovered. Nevertheless, we are all Christians who open the same Bible and bow before the same universal Lord. The "black perspective" or the "Native American perspective" or the "Asian perspective," is, of course, experienced within particular cultures; but if these perspectives lay claim to truth at all, they can and should be presented to and known by others outside of these cultures. This may be difﬁcult and require time and patience, but if truth is truly truth, the enterprise is possible and worthwhile.

Keith Yandell argues against the claim that knowledge is only contextual and local and not universal or commonly shared:

The questions to ask are questions about how the perspective of one context allows its inhabitants to see accurately a common world better than do those in other contexts, and how it prevents its inhabitants from accurately seeing a common world as well as those who do inhabit other contexts.... But those questions assume a
knowledge that is not merely contextual, local and particular. No knowledge is intrinsically local; all is potentially universal.24

Dorothy Sayers makes the helpful distinction between special knowledge and special ability with respect to "the woman's point of view." In areas where women have knowledge not typically—or ever—held by men, their "point of view" is uniquely valuable. Sayers notes that since some women know more about children than most men, their opinion as women is valuable, but only in the same way that a coal miner's opinion on coal-mining and a physician's opinion on disease is valuable. It is because they have special knowledge. But there are other matters where "the woman's point of view" has no value or does not even exist, since the particularities of being female are irrelevant. There is no "woman's point of view" on Greek grammar or logic or the art of writing a detective story.

However, if a woman derives an insight from Scripture that would normally be difficult for men to perceive, this insight would be true whether received by a woman or a man. For instance, the Study Bible for Women contains an insightful sidebar about the "crisis pregnancy" of Mary, which elaborates on facets of her condition that most men would never consider—such as her fears, need for friendship, and so on.25 Although it is more likely for an attentive woman—especially one who has experienced a crisis pregnancy—to discover these truths, if a woman knows these truths of Scripture, it means that her belief corresponds to what the sacred text teaches (which itself is an accurate report of what happened in history). Although men and women may have, in some cases, different ways of coming to know certain things, there is no "female truth" as opposed to "male truth." If any man or any woman knows anything, he or she must know something that is true, something that matches up with objective reality. Truth itself is not gendered; truth answers to reality.

Postmodernism and Ethnocentrism

This principle of seeking objective truth about race and gender should be applied more broadly to all of cultural history. Keith Windshuttle, an Australian historian and author of The Killing of History, a critique of postmodernist trends in history-writing, nonetheless recognizes that in his nation the "Aboriginal perspective, and the often shocking and disgraceful story of how Aborigines were treated, was omitted entirely" from history writing until 1970. He does not question "whether the views of this repressed 'other' should return or be revived." The question is whether the tools of traditional historiography need to be thrown out in order to do so.26 Windshuttle thinks not, and argues against the assumptions of postmodernists, which, he claims, work against any hope for understanding between groups or for building a more just social order.

Postmodernists reject history-writing based on observation and inductive argument as Enlightenment modernism. They also embrace relativism concerning truth and knowledge, and most deny that anything can be known with certainty. Each culture creates its own truth. Most deny that humans can "gain any direct contact with or access to reality." Instead, "we are locked within a closed system of language and culture, which refers not beyond our minds to an outside world but only inwardly to itself."27 With these assumptions locked in place, any meaningful communication between, say, Aborigines and white Australians or white Americans and Native Americans would be impossible in principle. Each culture cre-
ates truth through its language, and language cannot refer to extralinguistic realities. The Enlightenment vision of rational observation and inductive argument is merely a cultural prejudice that sheds no light on other cultures' histories. Yet without at least a partially knowable past as part of our common discourse, neither repentance nor restoration is possible. Ludwig Wittgenstein's epigram is telling: "Only someone who can reflect on the past can repent." 29

Terry Eagleton observes that the "postmodernist 'anti-ethnocentrism'" ironically rebounds into ethnocentrism since it "leaves our own culture conveniently insulated from anyone else's culture. All those anti-Western bleatings from the so-called third world may be safely ignored, since they are interpreting our conduct in terms quite irrelevant to us." 30 This makes moral discourse across cultures unattainable. The problem ramifications even within pluralistic cultures, where diverse ethnic and racial groups coexist within a common legal framework and geographic area. For instance, in America, a Laotian Hmong man in his thirties вполне a seventeen-year-old woman as part of the accepted marriage-by-capture practice of the Hmong. 31 This forces the postmodernist into a sharp dilemma. The traditional Hmong culture endorses this overtly patrarchal abduction as a binding marriage; the American legal system considers kidnapping a crime and not the equivalent of matrimony. Who is right? Whose law should obtain?

The Christian view provides the moral assessment that avoids both the errors of ethnocentrism and postmodernism. The Hmong people are made in the image and likeness of God and are eligible for redemption in Christ; but they are just as subject to sin as any other group. Given that patriarchal abuses flow from the disorder of the fall (Gen. 3:16), every culture is adversely affected by such abuses, and every Christian needs to work for equal dignity and respect for women and men. The Christian condemns the traditional Hmong practice on the basis of the woman's created dignity as a person with human rights granted by God. Kidnapping under the Old Testament law was a capital offense (Exod. 21:16; Deut. 24:7); the creation order for marriage is mutual care and concern in a voluntary, one-flesh relationship (Gen. 2:20-25); marriage should involve mutual submission, respect, and love (Eph. 5:21-33; I Cor. 7:1-7).

One can denounce the Hmong practice as the worst sort of misogyny, not because of any prejudice against Asians, but because of God's objective and cross-cultural standards. In fact, Hmong people who are Christians should oppose this practice. Similarly, Christians oppose female genital mutilation, abortion on demand, institutionalized poverty, racism, and slavery wherever they occur, because they hold every culture accountable to God, especially their own.

Using one's own culture as the final standard is idolatry. Even the ancient Jews, who were graciously selected by God from among all the peoples of the earth, could not invoke their ethnicity to justify themselves or excuse their sins. On the other hand, not recognizing the gifts God has given one's own culture is sinful ingratitude. Each culture is a complicated mixture of common grace, sin, and special grace. The wheat will grow with the tares until the final harvest (Matt. 13:24-30). The moral assessment of practices enshrined in other racial groups is not necessarily racist or ethnocentric. Charles Taylor makes this clear:

When we stand with the moral outlook of universal and equal respect, we don't consider its condemnation of slavery, widow-burning, human sacrifice, or female
circumcision only as expressions of our way of being, inviting a reciprocal and equally valid condemnation of our free labor, widow-remarriage, bloodless sacrifice, and sex equality from the societies where these strange practices flourish.... The moral outlook makes wider claims, and this by its very nature. For it engenders a pitiless criticism of all those beliefs and practices within our society which fail to meet the standard of universal respect.16

The standard of universal respect is no mere reification, social construct, or final vocabulary. We cannot alter it any more than we can create it or destroy it. The standard requires a standard-stipulator, who established the moral law over all nations, peoples, and for all time.19

The Christian insistence on the reality of an objective moral standard applicable to all people does not preclude a development over time of a culture’s or individual’s knowledge of moral truth, with respect to gender and race. Sadly, American Christians were divided over the legitimacy of slavery for far too long, with each side invoking Scripture for support. Christians also opposed women’s suffrage, supposedly on biblical grounds.20 But in both cases the interpreters were in error, not the Scriptures. As has been often said, “There may yet be more light to break forth from God’s word.”

Are Egalitarians Postmodernists?

Some have claimed that those who reject a gender-based hierarchy of authority and who hold to the full equality of men and women in marriage, the church, and society have capitulated to the postmodernist sensibility that texts can be deconstructed to mean things radically different from their intended meanings. Since the traditional view has been that the biblical text says that women must submit to their husbands unilaterally (i.e., in ways that husbands do not reciprocate) and that women should not be allowed to serve in the highest positions of leadership in the church, deviation from this view is deemed a concession to postmodernist ideas; Scripture “clearly teaches” otherwise. It is feared that some evangelicals have allowed “women’s experience” to pollute their understanding of the sacred text. The question as to whether the traditionalist view has correctly discerned the objective meaning of the biblical text often is not seriously considered for these reasons.

Those who make these charges typically categorize belief in biblical equality with all manner of deviations from orthodoxy. So, Robertson McQuilken and Bradford Mullen claim that

we are challenged by fellow evangelicals to give up Adam and Eve, role distinctions in marriage, limitations on divorce, exclusively heterosexual unions, hell, faith in Jesus Christ as the only way to acceptance with God and—most pivotal—an inerrant Bible.16

They also accuse egalitarians of “tortuous hermeneutics” in their defense of egalitarian marriage from Ephesians 5, and claim that the “cultural form of husband/wife, parent/child, master/servant relationships are part of the mandate in that passage and indeed define the principle of ‘being subject to one another’ enunciated as a preamble.”22
Evidently, according to these traditionalists, the authoritarian, patriarchal customs of ancient Greco-Roman societies—including the absolute rule of the wife by the husband and the ownership of the slave by the master—are divinely mandated for all time, and are to be seen as inherent to and compatible with the principle of mutual submission that the passage also mandates. This reading of the text is not only rather "tortuous" itself, but would universally sanction slavery as well as wives' unilateral submission to husbands, which were the cultural forms, after all. (This was the argument of Christian slave-owners before the Civil War.) Moreover, evangelical egalitarians do not "give up role distinctions in marriage," since they affirm heterosexual monogamy and all its sexual distinctions.

Yet the authors fail even to address such responses to their position, thinking they have dismissed the alternative view as merely tortuous, postmodernist hermeneutics. In this they commit the fallacy of guilt by association. This certainly inhibits healthy debate.7

The debate on gender roles is very complex, and I cannot settle it all here. My point is that although one may embrace egalitarianism for postmodernist reasons (as we will see below), a strong biblical case can be made for gender equality that keeps the notions of biblical inerrancy, objective truth, universal rationality, and authorial intent firmly in place. This is significant to understand because Christians often become unfair in labeling egalitarian believers as sub-Christian or even anti-Christian in this respect.

DE R R I D A T O T H E R E S C U E ?

Before addressing the specific charges by traditionalists, I want to consider an example of ill-advised postmodernist influence on the gender controversy. In critiquing the views of gender held by J. I. Packer, egalitarian Curt Purcell argues that Packer's belief in the inherent, objective meaning of Scripture is unwarranted. Purcell claims that, on the contrary, all language is equivocal and no language is univocal. "An irreducible moment of equivocality lies at the heart of all language, ever forcing us to decide how words with which we are confronted fit into the context in which we encounter them."44 He then quotes a passage from Derrida to make his point: "If, in fact, equivocality is always irreducible, that is because words and language in general are not and cannot be absolute objects. They do not possess any resistant and permanent identity that is absolutely their own."45 The last two sentences quoted by Purcell trail off into unintelligibility (as does much of Derrida), so I do not cite them.

To enlist Derrida for the cause of biblical equality is both unnecessary and self-destructive. Derrida removes any objective meaning from texts; their meaning is forever indeterminate. This view would render the concept of Scriptural authority void. If something is to have authority it must be in the intellectual position to demand and receive obedience. The author's voice must be heard for there to be authority. If a text is intrinsically and irreducibly equivocal, its meaning is unavailable and its interpreters can never be judged rationally against the one meaning of the text itself. The author vanishes, and readers are left adrift. Since Scripture is God's inspired word (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20-21), it does possess a "permanent identity that is absolutely its own." The divine Author employed human authors to make truth known. Our concern is how to interpret rightly and truly the objective meaning of the text, to discern how it coheres with the rest of Scripture and how the text applies to us today.
A difficulty in interpreting a particular text such as 1 Tim. 2:8-15 (concerning the place of women in the church) implies nothing about the text itself being equivocal. Paul, under infallible divine inspiration, had something definite in mind for his original readers, and that principle applies to us today, however different our cultural and ecclesiastical situation might be from that of the early church at Ephesus. What Paul meant, and what his words mean for us, is a matter of intense debate. Egalitarians find a principle concerning the inadvisability of women in that church teaching and having authority over men, because of some factor not inherent to their gender—such as ignorance or false doctrine. Traditionalists find a cross-cultural principle of male spiritual authority. Egalitarians disagree, since we find women in God-ordained leadership over men throughout Scripture. God would not break his own rules.\textsuperscript{74}

Peter did warn that some of Paul’s writings were difficult to understand, but he affirmed that they were still inspired Scripture, and that some had misinterpreted them to their own destruction (2 Pet. 3:16; see also Jer. 8:9). The very concept of a misinterpretation necessarily assumes an objective and determinate meaning that has been violated by bad faith or poor reasoning of some kind. Both the egalitarian and traditionalist interpretations cannot be correct; one has missed Paul’s original and intended meaning (which is singular, not plural). However, this does not make the egalitarian view postmodernist, since evangelical egalitarians reach their conclusions by using essentially the same exegetical methods as traditionalists. Egalitarians maintain that certain cultural prejudices have hindered traditionalists from seeing the theological, exegetical, and logical evidence against male authority and for biblical equality. The situation should not be viewed as a hopeless power struggle, since God’s word is “living and active” to accomplish its purposes in the long run (Heb. 4:12; see also Isa. 55:10-11).

In some limited cases, a particular section of Scripture may be interpreted in two opposing ways, each of which is equally rational, given the knowledge available at the time.\textsuperscript{44} That is, interpretation A and interpretation B may end up being exegetically equal; both can be rationally accepted by informed, wise, and godly people, and no third interpretation seems plausible. In this case, “It could go either way.” But it is either one way or the other, not both and not neither (unless a better interpretation C is found later). Even when an interpretation is difficult, some interpretations can be ruled out. Whatever Paul meant by being “baptized for the dead” (1 Cor. 15:29), and this is much disputed, he did not mean that we should perform proxy baptisms that somehow apply salvation to those now dead, as the Mormons teach, for this would contradict clear teaching elsewhere in Scripture on the need to find salvation before death (e.g., Heb. 9:27).\textsuperscript{44}

These issues in interpretation stem not from the text itself being equivocal (many texts that seem obscure to us were perfectly clear to the original recipients), but from our interpretational limitations. The meaning of the text remains unequivocal in itself, and with new arguments and discoveries the equivocality of our understanding of the text may be cleared up, or at least reduced. The reduction or elimination of ambiguity and unclarity in our understanding of Scripture should be the goal of biblical interpretation. This, however, is not Derrida’s point. His view in the passage quoted is that word meanings are inevitably and always equivocal; such a view must be rejected as destructive to biblical authority, to sound exegesis. As Carl Henry notes, “in the absence of an objective textual meaning, no
valid choice is possible between two or more conflicting interpretations.” The result is “hermeneutical nihilism.” The purpose of biblical interpretation is to discover the text’s meaning, not to supply or construct a meaning for the text.

Ironically, Derrida has attacked his critics, such as John Searle, for misinterpreting and misrepresenting his own work. Apparently, Derrida’s intended meaning took on an objective identity, which he expected his readers to ascertain. He even claimed that his point should have been clear and obvious to Searle! Millard Erickson notes that this is “an incredibly nondeconstructionist nonpostmodern response for someone who maintains that the meaning of a text is not in the author’s intention, but in what the reader finds it saying to him or her.” In response to a deconstructionist reading of Scripture, D. A. Carson explains that there is always “a link between text and authorial intent. I have never read a deconstructionist who would be pleased if a reviewer misinterpreted his or her work; thus in practice deconstructionists implicitly link their own texts with their own intentions.” If so, why should we exempt the biblical text—or any other text—from this commonsensical and eminently logical approach?

**WHY Egalitarianism NEED Not Be POSTMODERNIST**

The above postmodernist-leaning defense of egalitarianism does not exhaust the field of possibilities. I disagree with Packer’s conclusions on gender restrictions. However, I find no need to invoke notions of the intrinsic equivocacy of texts or to conscript Derrida to the cause. Theologically, I agree with Packer’s views of divine inspiration, the objective meaning of biblical texts, and the classical method of biblical interpretation.

The charge that biblical egalitarians are crypto-postmodernists rests on a few incorrect assumptions; by identifying them we can clear up some confusions so that a fair debate may ensue.

1. Egalitarians are accused of simply copying postmodern secular culture and twisting the Bible to mean what they want it to mean. This begs the question as to what the Scriptures actually teach. Egalitarians are asking for an alternative analysis of the ancient text, not an updated or edited Bible. The assumption that egalitarianism is postmodernist also commits the generic fallacy, that by discrediting the source of an idea, one discredits the idea itself. But even if some Christians have been challenged to rethink what Scripture teaches on gender because of feminist insights from secular culture (although much of secular feminism is patently unbiblical and rejected by evangelical egalitarians), it does not follow that Scripture itself opposes every aspect of feminism. Many evangelicals and fundamentalists, such as Jerry Falwell, initially rejected the civil rights movement as unbiblical and merely worldly, only to realize later that white Christians should have supported its nonviolent expressions all along, precisely because that was the biblical thing to do.

2. The charge is made that egalitarians make their own experience or beliefs the final authority over Scripture. Since they have felt uncomfortable with traditional gender roles, they have misinterpreted the Bible accordingly. One’s experience certainly affects how one comes to Scripture, but it does not determine how Scripture comes to one. Many egalitarians, such as my wife and I, were at first reluctant to embrace egalitarianism because we were not sure it was biblical. Early on we were rightly taught that we should put Scripture above experience. Therefore, we had to be thoroughly convinced theologi-
cally and exegetically before we could change our minds. Many other cases also follow this pattern. This is not a postmodernist matter of an individual or a community freely choosing a lifestyle without any objective criteria or concern for objective truth and rationality.

3. Some also argue that egalitarians deconstruct gender roles and engage in a postmodern construction of gender without objective constraints. This is why McQuilkin and Mullen put egalitarianism in the same category as homosexual unions, denying hell, and so on.69

It is true that egalitarians believe that many of the traditionalist views on gender are social reifications and are not rooted in God’s created order or Kingdom realities. For instance, if traditionalists take God to be male in some spiritual sense (and not all do), this is a reification, since God is beyond gender and sexuality.64 If traditionalists take maleness to mean superiority to femaleness with respect to leadership in the home and the church, egalitarians believe that they have taken a contingent social structure and absolutized it. Scripture is filled with examples of powerful women leaders (such as Deborah and other Old Testament prophetesses, and female prophets and leaders in the early church),67 and the New Testament teaches mutual submission and reciprocal love in marriage (Eph. 5:21-33; 1 Cor. 7:4; 1 Pet. 3:7).68

Egalitarians agree that God has framed our sexuality according to his wisdom. This means that heterosexual, monogamous marriage is the moral norm and the standard cross-culturally (Genesis 2). Fornication, adultery, and homosexual relations are intrinsically sinful and must be avoided (Exod. 20:14; Rom. 1:18-27; Eph. 5:3-5). Children should be prized and not aborted for personal preference or career advancement.69 However, egalitarians believe that the structure for marriage and ministry is not provided by male hierarchy but by Christian love (1 Corinthians 13), the principles of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), and the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:1-17). These are sufficient for friendship and leadership in marriage, the family, and the church. There is nothing postmodernist here. Further, biblical egalitarianism does not undermine “role distinctions” in marriage; the distinctions are real where they touch on sexual relations. Everything is not up for grabs if some of the traditional gender roles are challenged.

4. Many also assert that egalitarians relativize biblical passages about the submission of women by making them “merely cultural”; they make postmodern culture normative and deny “the clear teaching of Scripture.” Hermeneutically, all Christians must fathom how ancient commands obtain today. Paul said to greet one another with “a holy kiss,” that women should wear veils in church, and that slaves should submit to their masters. Christians today understand the cultural context of these commands, without rejecting them as uninspired. The operative question in understanding such texts is, “What is the principle behind the commands and how do we obey it today?”

Yes, Paul told the Corinthian church that women were not to speak in their worship service (1 Cor. 14:34-35). Does that mean women should not speak in churches today? The answer to this question requires an understanding of the cultural context of the Corinthian church. Egalitarians believe that “the universal principle behind Paul’s words is not the permanent silencing and subordinating of women in the church, but the curtailment of practices that disrupt the flow and order of the public assembly of believers.”70
The above response to these four assumptions only touches the tip of the iceberg. For an in-depth treatment of the historical, cultural, exegetical, and theological issues involved, the work of Rebecca Merrill Groothuis should be consulted, as well as other evangelical egalitarians. The divide between postmodernism and biblical egalitarianism is wide, and far wider than the divide between evangelical traditionalists and evangelical egalitarians.

**Beyond Reification and into Postmodernist Chaos**

Those postmodernists who take all gender identity to be mere reification sometimes confuse their lawlessness with liberation. Maureen O'Hara claims that a constructivist view of gender ought not lead to despair but "an enormous sense of relief, hope, and responsibility," because the idea that each of us recreates reality with each encounter fills me with wondrous hope, empowerment and community connection. If there is no absolute truth "out there" to create pristine "expert systems" that can somehow solve our problems mathematically... then we are called to a new kind of community. If I can make culture I must act responsibly. If I can only ever be part of the creation I must act humbly.

Exuberant academic prose does not justify non sequiturs. If there is no "absolute truth out there," then there is no possibility of responsibility or community or humility. These concepts imply that we are moral agents who owe allegiance to an authority beyond ourselves, and that we ought to act in certain ways in relating to one another. O'Hara's postmodernist constructivism eliminates the categories of moral authority and accountability entirely. Her hope is emptiness constructed upon emptiness—all the way down. This is what Francis Schaeffer called "semantic mysticism": authors use words with positive connotations that their own world view cannot rationally accommodate. This is done to mask their world view's philosophical malignancies.

**A Better Way Forward**

The biblical metanarrative supplies us with form and freedom for women and men of various races and ethnic extractions. We can live out our micronarratives and personal pilgrimages as gendered and racial beings within the all-encompassing metanarrative of God's providence. This is possible through the direction provided by Scripture, by the encouragement of the community of faith, and according to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Rather than making our differences our starting point, we should emphasize that we are first and foremost creatures before the face of our Creator. Christians, in addition, are redeemed people in Christ. As Paul exclaimed, all of our cultural background, ethnic inheritance, and even our gender pales in comparison with the wonder of knowing Christ (Phil. 3:1-11; Gal. 3:26-28). Glenn Loury, an African-American economist and writer, gets to the heart of the issue:

Who am I, then? Foremost, I am a child of God, created in his image, imbued with his spirit, endowed with his gifts, set free by his grace. The most important challenges and opportunities that confront me derive not from my racial condition, but
rather from my human condition. I am a husband, a father, a son, a teacher, an intellectual, a Christian, a citizen. In none of these roles is my race irrelevant, but neither can racial identity alone provide much guidance for my quest to discharge these responsibilities adequately.65

Instead of stereotyping others (or even ourselves) by race or gender, Christians should “let God be God” as he demonstrates his unshakable Kingdom through the marvelous diversity of his one redeemed people, the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-31). As these Kingdom realities are demonstrated, the hollowness of postmodernist posturings can be exposed in the light of something far greater.66

NOTES
1. I attempt to deal with many aspects of postmodernism in my forthcoming book, Truth Decay: Defending Postmodernism Against the Challenges of Postmodernism (InterVarsity Press), from which this essay is adapted.
5. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p. 62.
10. Ibid., p. 99.
15. Ibid., p. 154.
16. Ibid., p. 155.
19. This paragraph was written by Rebecca Merrill Groothuis.
23. Ibid., pp. 21-22.  
24. Ibid., p. 22.  
25. Ibid.  
26. Ibid.  
27. Ibid., p. 23.  
28. Ibid.  
29. Ibid.  
30. Against the charge that the Bible is written from a male perspective, see Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *Women Caught in the Conflict: The Culture War Between Traditionalism and Feminism* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997), pp. 103-8.  
34. Ibid., p. 36.  
37. This is a true story related to me by a Hmong student at Denver Seminary in 1997. The abductions can sometimes also involve rape. This is cited in Daniel A. Farber and Suzanna Sherry, *Beyond All Reason: The Radical Assault on Truth in American Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 106.  
39. See chapter eight for a discussion of the thetic grounding for morality.  
42. Ibid., p. 81.  
43. For an evangelical interpretation of Ephesians 5 that relies on no postmodernist assumptions, and which explains and defends egalitarian marriage, see Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *Good News for Women*, pp. 145-58; 164-70.  
46. They read: “They have their linguistic being from an intention which traverses them as mediations. The same word is always ‘other’ according to the always different intentional acts which thereby make a word significative;” ibid. This passage may be trying to prove Derrida’s point about the unintelligibility of texts! I assume he has one meaning in mind, but has difficulty express-
Postmodernism on Race and Gender: An Evangelical Response

47. For a discussion of this issue, see Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, Good News for Women, pp. 209-30.

48. I do not take this to be the case with 1 Tim. 2:11-14, since I believe the traditionalist view is much less plausible than the best egalitarian interpretations.


51. Ibid., pp. 296-315.


53. Erickson, op. cit., p. 156.


56. See Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, Good News for Women, pp. 91-117.

57. Ibid., pp. 189-201.

58. The NIV and NIVI translations do not reflect the issue of mutual authority in 1 Cor. 7:4 as well as do the NASB, NRSV, and the KJV.

59. For an argument that liberalized abortion is anti-women and anti-feminist, see Groothuis, Women Caught in the Conflict, pp. 75-87.

60. Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, Good News, p. 203.


62. See Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, Women Caught in the Conflict, pp. 89-108. Careful readers will not find any postmodernist philosophical assumptions in her defense of biblical egalitarianism.


66. My thanks go to Rebecca Merrill Groothuis for her invaluable and insightful assistance with this chapter.