

The United Church
Observer

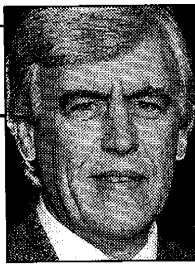
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Native school
wounds and regrets

A photograph of two young people sitting on a large, wet rock in a forest. The person on the left is wearing a blue and red jacket and white sneakers. The person on the right is wearing a pink shirt and is barefoot. They appear to be in conversation. The background is a dense forest with tall trees.

**Camping:
past memories,
future questions**



Paul Newman

Examinations of scriptural authority should look at discrimination of women. That would be an important step toward true inclusiveness.

Lois Wilson tells a story about when the central committee of the World Council of Churches was discussing the possibility of having an Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity With Women. At one point a male delegate asked impatiently, "Why is this necessary? I don't have any problems with my wife."

There are a lot of reasons why the Ecumenical Decade is necessary, not least in order to wake men up to some blind spots that we have had for centuries. It has already been more than a decade since a female theological student fined me five cents for every breach of inclusive language, and there is no doubt a lot to learn yet about what solidarity with women means.

It is pretty obvious that women have been discriminated against in the past and that a whole lot of that discrimination continues in the present. Solidarity with women is clearly needed to overcome women's poverty, violence against women, and the stereotypes of women that lead to discrimination.

One aspect of solidarity with women, however, is not so obvious but it is especially important because it has to do with an underlying cause of discrimination. I am referring to recognition of women's experience as a legitimate basis for questioning, at times, the authority of Scripture and church tradition.

Most people of goodwill can recognize that women must experience a deep feeling of unfairness when they are paid a lot less than men for doing the same kind of work. Most can identify with the frustrations of women who are not allowed to be eligible for certain vocations such as priesthood.

A considerable number, however,

seem to have difficulty understanding women who feel excluded by the use of language that consistently refers to human beings in male terms. And even more fail to feel the joy of women and men who for the first time have experienced God as female.

It's when women's experience seems to conflict with scriptural authority that some draw the line and say "You can't call God female. The Bible says God's a Father."

Christian churches over the centuries have severely opposed any who claimed that their experience of God might have more "authority" than the Scriptures or the councils of the church. They were called "enthusiasts" (from *en-theos*, having God within). Catholics who thought the church was the highest authority for faith, and Protestants who thought the Bible was the supreme authority were both fiercely opposed to the enthusiasts.

What was conveniently forgotten, of course, was that it was mostly men who interpreted what the Bible says, and they did it on the basis of their own experience. It was mostly male leaders who made the church's decisions about what was right for faith and life, and they were highly influenced by their experiences as men.

The fact is that the Bible and church doctrines were a product to some extent of the experiences and reasoning of men. That doesn't mean that men's experiences of God are all wrong or that the Bible and Christian teaching do not have any authority. What it means is that human experience must be recognized as having an undeniable place in the process of discerning what is authentic for faith and life.

The Ecumenical Decade is a time for the churches to reject the widespread movement to reaffirm subordination of women by appealing

to the authority of Scripture and tradition. Such a movement certainly exists, fuelled by belief in the inerrancy of Scripture and the desire for male supremacy.

It is not an exaggeration to say that in the churches the most dangerous enemy of women's equality and women's liberation is a misguided view of the authority of Scripture and tradition.

The alternative to treating Scripture and tradition as untouchable authorities is to acknowledge the reality of the Holy Spirit who can bring the living word of God to people through the Scriptures and who can be present in human experience to give authentic insights for faithful living. Of course, Christians must test the spirits to see if they are truly of God, and we do this by the criterion of the Spirit present in Jesus the Christ. Jesus is the Word by which all other words in the Bible are measured for authenticity. God's revelation in Jesus does not deny the validity of human experience; it confirms that the Spirit of God can be truly present in peoples' lives.

Human experience is like the lens through which the light of God comes to shine on the Scriptures and doctrines of the church. It's not unreasonable that the lens should be women's experience as much as men's.

If women's experience is recognized and listened to, there will be some changes made in how we understand God and the Scriptures. The combination of women's and men's experience will be like having two eyes open instead of only one.

Newman is interfaith dialogue officer in the Division of World Outreach.

This page provides space for the opinions of readers and for those whose views don't necessarily reflect the magazine's.