

Response to *Ancient Laws and Contemporary Controversies* by Cheryl Anderson  
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Often when I teach my Introduction to biblical exegesis class at my seminary I find a student or two who resist readings that incorporate social locations and experiences not of their own—like readings that take into account class, race, gender, sexuality, religious difference. These students ask: Why do we have to read these interpretations? I'm not African American or Latino or a woman, I am not from the continent of Africa—and I am certainly not gay! And won't I get into trouble for reading these articles written by those people who are breaking God's Law?! Cheryl Anderson's book, *Ancient Laws and Contemporary Controversies* does a wonderful job helping to answer questions like these in ways accessible to both laity and the seminary student. Those both familiar and not familiar with academic discussions surrounding concepts like ideology, patriarchy, queer theory, just to name a few, will find her work helpful. Her book focuses on biblical law, which Anderson believes forms the basis for understanding biblical authority. Yet too often laws have been used to justify excluding GLBTIQ communities, women, foreigners, or others from full membership in the community of faith-- Anderson finds such exclusions to be unjust. For the next few minutes I will focus on the first chapter of Anderson's book entitled, "The Need for Inclusive Biblical Interpretation," where she makes a strong case that reading inclusively is a moral imperative and that every biblical interpretation must presume a divine commitment to justice. Anderson writes: "the whole meaning of scripture is rooted in this divine encounter for justice. I readily concede that this is only one way of Reading Scripture. But I am convinced that incorporating the realities of the paradoxically marginalized majority is a theological imperative that we must heed" (29).

Anderson laments that there are dangers in many of our interpretations within the faith community especially when we interpret biblical law. Many interpretations do not take into account

feelings or experiences of the marginalized, and thereby rob the church of its full potential. She reminds us that the biblical law, even for Christians who at times falsely believe that Jesus and Paul abolished it, continues to function in Christianity as people buy into a series of ethical behaviors that are taken as being more authentically Christian or closer to God's intent even if such interpretations are counter their own best interest. For example, Anderson recounts an experience that she had with a young African American woman in one of her workshops. This woman, after hearing that Judges 19 taught an overall message that it is better that women are raped than men, and that laws in Exodus condone slavery, had enough and defiantly replied, "This is the Word of God. If it says slavery is ok, slavery is ok. If it says rape is ok, rape is ok." This woman's commitment to what she considered to be authentic Christianity caused her to interpret these texts against her own self and spiritual interests, especially as a descendant of African slavery and a woman. Why would this woman be so willing to adopt an interpretation that oppresses her?

Anderson sets off to answer this question and to provide a strategy for a critical inclusive reading of the Bible that liberates biblical texts from the monolithic and harmful ways they have been read throughout the years by both church and academy. She writes, "Exclusions within the law correspond to the same exclusions within the church tradition and to developments in Christian ethics" (4). Some of the harmful results of such exclusions are that women, and non-heterosexuals have been rejected for church leadership based on how these laws have been interpreted by the dominant society. While there have been pockets of hope- with the Episcopal elections of Gene Robinson, the first openly gay bishop, and Katherine Jefferts Schori, the first woman to preside over the Episcopal church in the US, there is still work to be done. Those who are not dominant in the society or considered "others" include women, African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Jews, and non-heterosexuals. These groups are often marginalized based on the dominant readings of biblical texts where male dominant/female subordinate is the gender paradigm. Anderson defines the dominant group, drawing on Audrey Lourde's

discussion of the “mythical norm” in America that is defined as “white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian and financially secure.” (see Audrey Lourde p. 19). I found Anderson’s discussion of authentic Christianity helpful (5-6). Many conservatives have been trying to return to a concept of “right doctrine” or “orthodoxy.” She gives as examples, a female faculty member at a Southern Baptist Seminary who was fired to more authentically adhere to 1 Timothy 2:12 that keeps women from teaching men. She also cites the reinstatement of the ancient Good Friday Mass by Pope Benedict 16<sup>th</sup> that includes a prayer for the conversion of Jews. Anderson points out how these Conservative movements that try to bend the church in the direction of what they believe embodies more authentic readings of texts unfairly paint those in the church who are more hospitable to marginalized groups as “unchristian.” To counter this exclusionary tactic, Anderson calls for a reading of biblical texts that is both critical and inclusive.

To be critical the text must be evaluated and not just accepted at face value: “God said it, I believe it and that is that.” The power structures or ideologies of the text must also be taken into consideration. Anderson defines a critical reading as a reading that is carefully evaluated and that searches for the text’s underlying ideologies. What she means by this is that texts are not value free and often function to serve the interests of the powerful at the expense of those less powerful. This is the case when readers take for granted that the way texts are constructed serve as universal truth. The harmful result if critical and inclusive approaches are not applied is that the dominate readings will continue to be perpetuated, which does not help to transform the oppressive systems. Anderson draws on liberation theologian Paulo Freire and his pedagogical model of education to make this point (8).

This approach also requires two theological judgments: that the Bible is a human witness and, as a result, sometimes God’s divine will is distorted. Also- God is against ideology- or against those who use their power to oppress others. I find this discussion to be very accessible- Discussions on power and

ideology can be very obtuse but Anderson explains it in a way that is easily understood and will be quite helpful for my seminary students.

After setting the groundwork for her method, Anderson defines in detail who she considers “other” or those outside the dominant reading of the texts and how biblical interpretation has helped justify their lower status. She provides a helpful discussion of patriarchy and how this world view has functioned to promote male privilege, male domination and male identity in the text—many of the laws do not take into account how a non-male would feel. She gives as an example the law in Exodus that requires a woman to marry her rapist. I particularly appreciate her discussion on heterosexism. Anderson makes no apologies for including the GBLTQI community fully into the church. Too many interpreters try to create an apologetic for their acceptance to placate those who disagree. Anderson cuts to the chase and boldly insists that there are no readings that exclude anyone due to their sexual orientation that are just.

This discussion on sexuality is appropriate for my current social location. Presently the Moravian church is struggling with these issues and is more fully in the conversation since they have recently come into full communion with two denominations, the UCC and ELCA who have critically and inclusively read the biblical text and now ordain gay and lesbian clergy. My prayer is that such a strategy can be used to move my denomination in a likewise direction.

Anderson’s discussion on hierarchies is especially helpful as she relates the “interlocking” nature and “multidimensional” levels of hierarchy. Her approach will open the discussion in the classroom because many people function in multiple groups with differing power structures. When she locates herself in various power groups Anderson’s self-description wonderfully illustrates what she means by this: “Speaking personally, I have advantages because I am an educated professional, and I am an ordained minister in a mainline Protestant denomination (the United Methodist Church). As a seminary

professor, I may not be affluent, by any stretch of the imagination, but I do have some advantages based on class. Another advantage I have is that I am a heterosexual in a system that privileges heterosexuality. At the same time, I face disadvantages because I am female (not male) and African American, a racial minority in the midst of white Western hegemony.” Helping biblical readers identify the ways we function in our own structures helps us be more aware of the flowing nature of power.

Anderson calls us to unmask the hidden particularity of traditional biblical interpretations by exposing how dominant culture is able to maintain power. One of these strategies is to proclaim the divine origins of biblical texts, which then allows them to ignore all human agency in creating these texts—this is the fundamentalist approach. Another strategy is to argue that scripture doesn’t contain but is the word of God. Likewise the strategies of those interpreting biblical texts in the academy need to be unmasked. She draws on Dale Martin who addresses a common assumption held by scholars and laity that “the Bible ‘speaks’ and our job is to listen.” Such approaches ignore the reality that it is humans who do the listening and interpretation and are responsible for all resultant actions and interpretations, not the text.

One of the many strengths of this book that will be valuable in the seminary setting is its commitment to the church and to the issue of the authority of scripture. Anderson summarizes her argument in chapter one and states that authority does not have to be hierarchical but relational (8). Moreover, her method is “an inclusive approach to biblical interpretation that remains committed to both the Christian tradition and the concept of biblical authority” (7). This intentional concern for these two issues is lacking in most of the discussions on biblical exegesis and interpretation and one that is essential for me and my students to grapple with as we interpret texts for faith communities. In addition, Anderson posits that questions should be raised concerning whether or not these texts can be

used as moral guides; Israel, after all, is not an imperfect embodiment of living moral and divine visions!! Further, she notes that the biblical author has Jesus Christ as God's Word incarnate, not the Bible itself.

Not only is Anderson's book incredibly helpful- it is a fun read. I can't remember the last time I read a book on exegesis where it discussed the missionary position or seen "ball buster" and "castrating bitch" in the context of biblical interpretation. This is a book that will be part of my life and that of my students for many years to come. Thank you so much Cheryl for this gift.