Some time ago, J. I. Packer published a short piece in Christianity Today, titled “Let’s Stop Making Women Presbyters.” As the title suggests, this piece is a straightforward example of the age-old attempt to justify the treatment of women as second-class and substandard—an oppressive gesture, even if unintended as such. However, if Patricia Hill Collins is correct in saying that oppressive situations are inherently unstable, then it stands to reason that somewhere in Packer’s argument there will be instability or contradiction which undermines his argument. That is not to say that the contradiction will be obvious or easy to spot. Very possibly because they do not see themselves as oppressors, many apologists for oppression are very good at dissimulating, obscuring, or even ignoring the contradictory nature of their positions. Nevertheless, through a careful reading of Packer’s essay, I hope to point out and explain the way in which his argument betrays itself and comes undone.

Packer begins by asking: “Why has so much of the church in our time come to think that introducing women into the presbyterate is good, right, wise and pleasing to God?” He then considers five factors which, according to him, have contributed to this situation. One is “the feminist ideology that demands equal rights everywhere.” Another is the fact that women have been excelling at jobs that traditionally have belonged exclusively to men. He next reason (in perhaps a sort of oblique and grudging nod to the accomplishments of biblical feminism) is that it is not obvious or easy to spot. Very possibly because they do not see themselves as oppressors, many apologists for oppression are very good at dissimulating, obscuring, or even ignoring the contradictory nature of their positions. Nevertheless, through a careful reading of Packer’s essay, I hope to point out and explain the way in which his argument betrays itself and comes undone.

Packer offers a number of reasons why women should not be ordained. He says that, in the Bible, Jesus appointed no women apostles. Packer also says that Paul ordained no women but, on the contrary, used his apostolic authority to forbid women’s leadership. Packer says that, since Jesus was a man, the presbyters whose responsibility it is to represent Jesus to their congregations should be men. Then, Packer flatly asserts that the Bible dictates gender roles:

The creation pattern, as biblically set forth, is: man to lead, woman to support; man to initiate, woman to enable; man to take responsibility for the well-being of the woman, woman to take responsibility for helping man.

It is at this point that Packer departs from the principle of Scriptural authority that he laid down only a few paragraphs earlier, for he continues: “Scripture implies, and...
experience surely confirms; that where these relational dynamics are disregarded... The contradiction which I have uncovered does not, at first blush, look very impressive. Even if it is granted that it is a contradiction (and I would not be surprised if there were some who would not grant this), could it not be a mere slip—an oversight that doesn’t really prove anything? I do not think so, and I will try to show that this is precisely where we can see the apparently solid foundation of Packer’s argument start to wobble.

Let us go back over Packer’s argument again. In order to justify the exclusion of women from the presbyterate, Packer must somehow deny the legitimacy of the factors which, according to him, are motivating the “modern” trend of women’s ordination. Packer seeks to accomplish this by drawing a sharp distinction between Scripture and what is “external” to it (i.e. “secular, pragmatic, and social factors,” “additions from any worldly or ecclesiastical source,” “an external interpreter”), and then by denying (or at least seriously denigrating) the legitimacy of anything “outside” of Scripture with regard to settling matters of faith. Since he only sees fit to acknowledge, as motivating women’s ordination, factors which would seem clearly to fall on the “wrong” (external or experiential) side of his distinction, women’s ordination comes off looking rather badly.

Packer then invokes the authority of Scripture, in order both to reinforce his distinction and buttress his anti-feminist position. But in doing so, he places himself in an awkward position for the purposes of his argument, because even an inerrant Bible must be interpreted. As St. Frances de Sales put the problem to the Reformers,

If the Church can err, O Calvin, O Luther, to whom will I have recourse in my difficulties? To Scripture, they say; but what will I do, poor man that I am? For it is with regard to Scripture itself that I have trouble. I do not doubt whether or not I should adjust faith to Scripture, for who does not know that it is the word of truth? What bothers me is the understanding of this Scripture.8

Packer attempts to evade this problem by the sheer assertion that, in effect, Scripture does not require interpretation; on his account, Scripture is sufficient, clear, and self-interpreting. All we need to do, he seems to suggest, is look and see what Scripture says. But is this possible? It might be if the language of the Bible were entirely univocal. However, that is far from the case. Even the most strident literalist would have to admit that much of what the Bible teaches is taught through metaphor, parable, and otherwise figurative language—all of which are far from univocal, and all of which require interpretation.

Of course, this need for interpretation is not limited to obviously figurative language. An irreducible moment of equivocity lies at the heart of all language, ever forcing us to decide how the words with which we are confronted fit into the context in which we encounter them—forcing us, that is, to interpret. If this were not the case, language could not even function as language. It is only a certain flexibility which allows us to employ the “same” word in different contexts. But this very flexibility also forces us to think about which way a word is being “flexed” when we encounter it. As Jacques Derrida says,

That is still to say nothing about the special exegetical difficulties surrounding the passages most often used to justify patriarchy in the church. For example, Swidler says of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, “This is a notoriously difficult passage to understand, so much so that scholars often debate what is even a correct translation.”11 In Appendix II of Gretchen Gaebelien Hull’s Equal to Serve, Sanford Douglas Hull has compiled a list of the exegetical difficulties of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36, and 1 Timothy 2:8-15.12 And even Peter says that Paul’s letters (from which most of the so-called anti-feminist passages are taken) are difficult to understand (2 Peter 3:16)!

For all these reasons, it seems fair to say, contra Packer, that interpretation is unavoidable in our search to understand Scripture. But as soon as this is allowed, and it seems that it must be, “external” concerns become very relevant as mediating factors in our understanding of Scripture. Interpretation emerges out of the interpreter, and the interpreter emerges out of the intersection of her or his gender, class, personal and social history, race, and a whole host of other factors which Packer would no doubt dismiss as “external” to an understanding of Scripture.
Thus, the neat opposition which Packer posits between “external” factors on the one (“bad,” feminist) side and Scripture on the other (“good,” traditionalist) side, is significantly compromised. However much Packer may wish to banish “external” factors to the periphery (by labeling them as “secular” and ascribing them to “those feminists”) and however much Packer may assert that he has a pure and immediate understanding of Scripture, “external” factors already inevitably inform his own understanding of Scripture. Thus it is just a matter of time before he himself brings experience (an “external” factor, by his own account) to the aid of his interpretations, revealing them to be just that—interpretations.

In this way, Packer unwittingly points to the possibility that women’s (and other men’s) experience might suggest an alternative interpretation of Scripture. When he calls upon experience to buttress his argument, he tacitly invites others to consult their own experience on the matter, with no guarantee that their experience will confirm his assertions. Thus, more generally, and quite in spite of himself, he gives back with one hand what he took away with the other, namely, the relevance of “external” reasons for women’s ordination.

Interestingly, Packer’s contradictory move is structurally similar to another contradictory move described by Gretchen Gaebelein Hull in her book Equal to Serve. In the chapter titled “Conflicting Signals,” Hull describes how her church, which “had the policy that women were not to be in positions of leadership or in positions where they would teach men,” was repeatedly forced due to circumstances to put her in positions of leadership and in positions in which she was teaching men.13

The tension which she felt in such contradictory situations was certainly more obvious and existential than the tension between Packer’s stated intent of relying on Scripture alone and his actual dependence upon experience. Be that as it may, in both cases someone is attempting to repress or exclude something to which they must ultimately resort—in Packer’s case it is anything “external” to Scripture, and in the case of the church Hull describes, it is the ministry of women as leaders and teachers. It is no accident that arguments of the sort Packer offers are often used to justify policies of the sort Hull describes. Both follow the same spurious “logic,” the logic of patriarchy.

This logic is exclusionary and oppressive and, as we have seen, gives rise to contradictions whether it is employed on the level of oppressive policies and practices or on the more theoretical level of justifying such policies and practices. The pernicious effects of this contradictory logic reflect and reproduce each other on the different levels (and not only on the two mentioned here).

In conclusion, then, I would caution biblical feminists against unwittingly adopting this logic in responding to Packer and others like him. On the level of theory and discussion, we should not try to “beat them at their own game,” for their own game is self-defeating. Rather than acceding to their terms and agreeing to an extreme and unrealistic version of sola scriptura, we must acknowledge the role of experience (including women’s experience) in affecting our understanding of Scripture, and work out a more dialogical hermeneutic. On the level of practice, we must not simply attempt to secure for women an equal position in the hierarchies; rather, we must radically redefine the very notions of hierarchy and authority in the light of Jesus’ teachings and examples.

At bottom, biblical feminism cannot merely be the “yes” to replace patriarchy’s “no.” The difference must be more fundamental than that, or else we are not really moving beyond patriarchy, nor are we really being biblical. We must learn to think according to an entirely different logic—one that is more inclusive, more consistent in theory and in application, and, when it comes down to it, more Christian. This way is more difficult, because it is the way of the Cross.

3 Ibid, 18.
5 Ibid, 19.
6 Ibid, 20.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
12 Gretchen Gaebelein Hull, Equal to Serve (Tarrytown, NY: Revell, 1987), 251-266.
13 Ibid, 32-44. The quotation appears on p. 38.