

Rosemary Radford Ruether's Jesus: An Iconoclastic Liberator

Miyon Chung

Torch Trinity Graduate School of Theology, Korea

The integrity of the Christian tradition is indisputably grounded upon the person and work of Jesus Christ. The meaning of the Christian confession that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever,"¹ however, has produced exceedingly diverse interpretations for theological methods and content.² With the arrival of feminist theologians in the middle of the twentieth century, the very credibility of the Christian tradition was retested for its content and relevance based on their insistence that there exists an inseparable causal relationship between gender experience, theological interpretations, and praxis.³ Specifically, feminist theologians argue that orthodox Christology reflects predominantly androcentric patriarchal ideology and therefore has failed to communicate Jesus' iconoclastic, subversive teaching and life against status systems, especially within religious communities. They, therefore, claim that "the Christ symbol must be reconstructed so that all who engage it may find in it a source of human liberation."⁴

1. Heb 13:8 (NIV).

2. See, for example, Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

3. Ann Loades, "Introduction," in *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, ed. A. Loades (London: SPCK, 1990), 3. See also Ann Carr, "Is a Christian Feminist Theology Possible?," *Theological Studies* 45 (1982): 295.

4. Maryanne Stevens, "Introduction," in *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol: Essays in Feminist Christology* (New York: Paulist, 1993), 1. It should be noted that analyzing feminist methodologies of biblical hermeneutics and theology is almost impossible: because of "the overwhelming diversities." But they do have a consistent starting point, the experience of oppression, and a goal which is liberation for all. See Elizabeth Achtemeier, "The Impossible Possibility: Evaluating the Feminist Approach to Bible and Theology," *Int* 42 (1988): 45.

Furthermore, it should be noted that some feminist theologians have declared themselves to be post-Christian and have thus repudiated any redemptive significance in the Bible and in Jesus Christ. See Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 51. See also Pamala Milne, "No Promised Land: Rejecting the Authority of the Bible," in *Feminist Approaches to the*

Rosemary Radford Ruether's startling question illustrates well the dilemma feminists encounter in their consideration of the redemptive role of Jesus Christ: "Can a male Savior save women?"⁵ Appropriating the Marxist-Liberationist hermeneutics of suspicion, Ruether begins Christology as a critical reflection on Jesus of the New Testament as traditionally interpreted and theologized by the Church.⁶ According to Ruether, orthodox teachings about Jesus Christ have created harmful impact on women's self and societal images through their androcentric representation of Jesus' incarnation. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to delineate Rosemary Radford Ruether's Christology as an outgrowth of feminist hermeneutical critique against traditional theology. The scope of this paper does not necessarily extend to thoroughly assessing Ruether's New Testament hermeneutics. Rather, it is to introduce Ruether's Christology within the overarching context of feminist hermeneutical principles and theological goals.

Feminist Hermeneutical Principles

Ruether's Christology is built upon the following hermeneutical principles that are characteristically feminist. First, she posits that all textual/hermeneutical activity begins and ends as a reflection on human experience, including the experience of the divine.⁷ Insofar as theology involves reflection and interpretation, it is also governed by subjectivity and contextuality.⁸ From these assertions, Ruether concludes that traditional Christian theology is fundamentally not neutral or universal but a perspectival product of patriarchal presuppositions and ideologies precisely because it is a product of predominantly male workmanship.

Second, drawing from comparative literature analysis of the Ancient Near East, Ruether regards the Christian faith, especially the Christ figure, as an intelligent integration of multiple religious traditions or myths.⁹ She locates the power and integrity of Christianity in precisely

Bible, ed. Phyllis Trible et al. (Washington: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1994), 50. She states, "I think feminists should abandon the idea of authoritative Scripture because it is more detrimental than beneficial to women seeking equality." She confines her use of the Bible in terms of critiquing Christianity.

5. R. R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983), 116.

6. Ruether, therefore, places her Christology section after the anthropology section in *Sexism and God-Talk*.

7. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 11-13. For an overview of feminist hermeneutics, see Francis Martin, "Feminist Hermeneutics: An Overview," *Communion* 18 (1991): 144-163.

8. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 18.

9. R. R. Ruether, "Can Christology be Liberated?," in *Reconstructing the*

the fact that "it has become a successful mutant" by incorporating the vital aspects of different religious traditions," while still keeping alive a real historical "continuity" between Christianity and the messianic faith of Judaism and of Jesus.¹⁰

Third, Ruether not only applies the feminist hermeneutic of suspicion on the Christian tradition but also on the Bible itself.¹¹ Over against the Protestant confession of *sola scriptura*, she regards the Bible as a patriarchal workmanship that contains misogynic texts.¹² However, she does not reject the entire Bible, for in it she finds a strand of "a prophetic-liberating tradition" that can be used to "clean up" patriarchal ideology embedded in it.¹³ Ruether identifies the principles of the "prophetic-liberating tradition" as: "(1) God's defense and vindication of the oppressed; (2) the critique of the dominant systems of power and their power holders; (3) the vision of a new age to come in which the present system of injustice is overcome and God's intended reign of peace and justice is installed in history; and (4) finally, the critique of ideology, or of religion, since ideology in this context is primarily religious."¹⁴

Wherever Ruether sees the biblical texts revealing "only a demonic falsification" of women's personhood, however, she calls to discard them because they contradict the Bible's own redemptive function.¹⁵ When accused of unjustifiably employing a canon-within-the-canon approach, she points out that Christian theologians have always been using biblical texts selectively within the Canon and that women need only to claim this historical practice to construct a liberating theology for women and others similarly marginalized and oppressed.¹⁶

Fourth, Ruether argues that the Bible consequentially inculcates a misogynic ideology to its readers, thereby perpetuating a patriarchal worldview from generation to generation.¹⁷ She, therefore, calls women to act as authentic subjects of theological reflection and refused to be

Christ Symbol: Essays in Feminist Christology, ed. Maryanne Stevens (New York: Paulist, 1993), 7-29.

10. R. R. Ruether, "An Invitation to Jewish-Christian Dialogue: In What Ways Can We Say That Jesus Was 'The Christ?'" *The Ecumenist* 10 (1972): 19.

11. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 22-23.

12. It should be noted that Ruether's religious background is Roman Catholicism. As such, her view of the relationship between Scripture and tradition is more fluid than that of the Protestantism.

13. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 22-23.

14. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 24.

15. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 22-23.

16. Martin, "Feminist Hermeneutics," 151-152.

17. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 23.

portrayed in an objectifying manner.¹⁸ This means that the overall task of feminist hermeneutics/theology is to utilize women's experience as a normative/corrective principle to challenge and revise the androcentric biblical and Christian theological traditions. In an epistemologically bold move, Ruether redefines the integrity of Christian theology by this axiom: "whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine, to reflect the authentic nature of things, or to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer or a community of redemption."¹⁹ Furthermore, Ruether maintains that the feminist critique of patriarchy can be applied to bring liberating implications to all those who have experienced objectification by tyrannical authorities.²⁰

Fifth, as already implied by her low view of scriptural authority, Ruether insists that feminists not only reassess the Christian Scripture and tradition but also actively engage with other potentially sacred sources, even the "pagan" and "post-Christian" sources such as the Ancient Near Eastern texts.²¹ The single criterion by which Ruether judges the redemptive quality of a given source does not lie in its inherent claim to divine revelation or historical validation thereof, but in the text's own capacity to promote or inspire the full humanity of women. She writes, "[W]hat . . . promote[s] the full humanity of women is of the Holy, it does reflect the true relation to the divine, it is the true nature of redemptive community."²²

Lastly, Ruether rejects the radically transcendent notion of revelation and reconceptualizes it in purely anthropocentric terms. For her, revelation is not an "otherworldliness" that breaks into this world, but a "breakthrough experience" that donates the human subject the opportunity to transcend her "ordinary fragmented consciousness." In this inspirational experience, which Ruether characterizes as a "grace event," the human subject is able to gain a moment to recast/reinterpret the experienced reality from a supra-mundane perspective.²³ In other words, grace as an "event" is not predicated upon a divine-human personal encounter; grace is what inheres in the textuality of a feminist revision of patriarchal works.²⁴

18. R. R. Ruether, "Liberation of Christology from Patriarchy," in *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, ed. Ann Loades (London: SPCK, 1990), 138-147.

19. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 19.

20. R. R. Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Paulist, 1974).

21. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, ch. 2.

22. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 19.

23. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 13.

24. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 18.

Ruether's Critique of Logos Christology

From the standpoint of the aforementioned feminist critique of Christianity, Ruether first critiques classical Christology, that is, Logos Christology, before she offers a feminist alternative. Imposing evolutionistic presuppositions upon Christianity, she postulates that the portrait of Jesus we have today is not necessarily eyewitness testimonies but that which has evolved during the span of the first five centuries.²⁵ Specifically, Ruether deduces that Logos Christology is actually a theological synthesis between the Logos of Sophia or the Logos of the creation principle concept found in Hellenistic Jewish myth and classic Jewish messianism.²⁶ In it, Jesus was presented both as the personification of divine wisdom and the sign of the redeemed era, which "grounds and reveals cosmos and unites the human with the divine."²⁷ By creating this type of fusion, early Christians sought to affirm the continuity of God's work in creation and redemption—i.e., God's presence in the world—and simultaneously distinguish the Christian faith proper from Gnosticism.

The first major problem Ruether has with Logos Christology has to do with portraying Jesus as the cosmic Savior. Ruether does agree that Jesus as the Christ is the "most fundamental affirmation" of Christianity; however, she emphatically disagrees that Jesus is the unique and decisive revelation of God.²⁸ In her assessment, traditional Christianity has failed to take Jesus' Jewish personal and societal contexts seriously and thereby grossly misinterpreted Jewish messianism.²⁹ Even within the immediate context of the New Testament, Jesus' truly human messianic identity is eclipsed by various divine designations, such as the Teacher, Revealer, or "paradigmatic" initiator of the Messianic Age through his miraculous acts.³⁰

She writes, "Once the mythology about Jesus as Messiah or divine *Logos*, with its traditional masculine imagery, is stripped off, the Jesus of

25. Ruether blames Christianity for imperialism, misogyny, anti-Semitism, and other manifestations of patriarchal oppression. See Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, ch. 5; R. R. Ruether, *To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 42, 48-52.

26. Ruether, "Can Christology be Liberated," 8-14. Although Ruether conjectures that such development was initially begun by the disciples of Jesus after witnessing the disillusioning crucifixion, she neither explicitly denies nor affirms the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. See Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, ch. 5.

27. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 117; Ruether, "Can Christology be Liberated," 8.

28. Ruether, "Jewish-Christian Dialogue," 17.

29. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 127-134 and *To Change the World*, 48-53.

30. Ruether, "Jewish-Christian Dialogue," 18.

the synoptic Gospels can be recognized as a figure remarkably compatible with feminism.”³¹ She further maintains that the apocalyptic hope that Jesus once proclaimed was replaced by the “non-historical symbols of transcendence” and cosmological myths derived from other religions.³² As a result, the “Christology from above” was constituted by replacing the historical Jesus with “an archetypal symbol of ideal humanity.”³³ Therefore, Ruether seeks to reconstruct Jesus not as a scientific recount of the historical Jesus but as an all-inclusive “Christ-Symbol” that can serve as a liberating/redemptive symbol for all humankind.³⁴

Ruether’s second problem has to do with the dismissal of the female divine metaphors found in Jewish wisdom tradition and of gender inclusive references in Jewish messianism and instead passing on only the “Son of God” and the Logos metaphors.³⁵ Even though Christianity has never explicitly stated that “God was literally male,” it has fostered a belief that “God represents preeminently the qualities of rationality and sovereign power” in masculine terms.³⁶ Ruether traces the reason behind the infiltration of Hellenistic anthropological assumptions into Logos Christology. Namely, early Christians made the grave mistake of importing the androcentrism embedded in the Logos of Hellenism into Hebraic messianism, thereby associating Christ’s divine qualities—“the sovereign power, rationality, and normative humanity”—with his incarnate maleness.³⁷ In other words, they assumed that Christ as the image of God had to be incarnated as male because they were influenced by

31. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 135; Ruether, “Can Christology be Liberated,” 8.

32. Ruether, “Can Christology be Liberated,” 18.

33. Ruether, “Can Christology be Liberated,” 18-19. Specifically, Ruether accuses what she calls the deutero-Pauline tradition for having “repressed both the apocalypticism and the incipient egalitarianism” in the early Church.

34. Ruether, “Can Christology be Liberated,” 8.

35. Ruether, “Can Christology be Liberated,” 8-9, 48-49, 37-39. Ruether also accuses the Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds for having crystallized the detrimental result of Logos-Messiah synthesis by sanctioning patriarchy as the official theological and social foundation; they portrayed God as the *Pantocrator* or the Christian emperor and the Christian bishop as the Vicar of Christ. She further insists that patriarchal ideology is responsible for causing Christianity to pursue the imperialistic interests of the West through colonial rule. See also Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 124-125.

36. Ruether, “Can Christology be Liberated,” 9.

37. Ruether, “Can Christology be Liberated,” 9. See Plato, *The Republic* 5-10 at <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html>. For feminist views on Plato’s treatment of women, see Morag Buchan, *Women in Plato’s Political Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1999). See also Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993; repr., New York: Routledge, 1997), 70-103.

Hellenistic anthropology in which only men were thought to possess the Logos via its particularization as the rational principle in the male-human soul. That the self-disclosure of God actually occurred in Jesus the Man, therefore, only intensified the patriarchal preference for male-related divine metaphors.

Third, Ruether asserts that androcentric prejudice in Logos Christology has produced damaging implications for woman's personhood and redemption. Although the book of Genesis states that both male and female are created in the *imago Dei*, Patristic works in general do not attribute the *imago Dei* directly to women.³⁸ Instead, they present women as "non-normative and non-theomorphic" beings, who can only be saved by being included "'under' an ontological maleness . . . just as they were included 'under,' and represented by, the male head of the family juridically in patriarchal society and law."³⁹ Ruether uses Augustine as an example to verify her conclusions. Augustine's works deny that women bear God's image directly, although he does not refute that Christ's work is efficacious for redeeming women's souls.⁴⁰ Thomas Aquinas is another example Ruether cites. Having been influenced by Aristotelian androcentric anthropology, Aquinas wrote that the maleness of Christ was ontologically necessary in order for Christ to represent the fullness of humanity, which women possessed only derivatively and imperfectly. Ruether denotes that both theologians are responsible for the idea that the "female cannot represent the human, either for herself or generically."⁴¹

Henceforth, for Ruether, gender language in theology must be used "to affirm that God both transcends and yet includes the fullness of the humanity of both men and women," so that whoever engages with Jesus can discover the liberating power implicit in his life and teachings.⁴² In

38. Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image: An Introduction to Feminist Anthropology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2007). Gonzalez deals with feminist anthropological perspectives in chs. 3 and 4 after she reviews biblical and historical teachings regarding the image of God.

39. Ruether, "Can Christology be Liberated," 12.

40. Ruether, "Can Christology be Liberated," 10-11. See Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 12, 7, 10 at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/130112.htm>. See also Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image*, 36-40; Maureen McKnew, "Augustine on Women: Misogynist, Apologist or Simply a Mixed Bag?" <http://heritage.villanova.edu/edu/vu/heritage/allthings/2001SU.htm>; and Judith Chelius Stark, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Augustine* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2007).

41. Ruether, "Can Christology be Liberated," 12. Thomas Aquinas, *The Disputed Questions on Truth*, vol. 2, *Questions, X-XX*, trans. James V. McGlynn (Innannapolis: Hackett, 1994). See also Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image*, 41-46.

42. Ruether, "Can Christology be Liberated," 12.

fact, Ruether sees it necessary to reinterpret “all the symbolic underpinnings of Christology” in order to “reaffirm the basic Christian belief that women are included in redemption, ‘in Christ.’”⁴³

Jesus as an Iconoclastic Liberator: Ruether’s Feminist Alternative

In order to recover Jesus’ relevance for today’s women, whose equal status has already been affirmed by the contemporary socio-political establishment, Ruether tries to re-present “the Christ symbol” from feminist ethical and theological interests.⁴⁴ This means that Ruether aims to do more than just emphasize how Jesus was a sympathizer of women and is now a co-sufferer of the oppressed, for it “does nothing to affirm a like holistic humanity for women.”⁴⁵ She insists that feminist Christology “must be rooted in the message and praxis of the historical Jesus who embodied the prophetic-messianic tradition”⁴⁶ and at the same time be consistent with the “hermeneutical circle” that exists between “our contemporary values, concerns, and faith-stance and our reading of the Bible.”⁴⁷

The following are the two interwoven hermeneutical trajectories upon which Ruether’s Christology is built. First, the identity of Jesus is constituted by his particularity, that is, his Jewish, male, and messianic role. Jesus is a representative messianic figure from the Jewish prophetic tradition, but his disciples manufactured his identity into a universal redemptive figure. What is crucial here is that Jesus himself did not express any intention of establishing a religion separate from Judaism.⁴⁸ Christianity’s failure to understand Jesus in his Judaic messianic context has resulted in dualistic “schisms” between judgment and promise, particularism and universalism, law and grace, letter and spirit, and old and new Adam.⁴⁹ Instead, Ruether posits that messianism should be

43. Ruether, “Can Christology be Liberated,” 14.

44. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 24.

45. Ruether, “Can Christology be Liberated,” 13, 23.

46. Mary Hembrow Snyder, *The Christology of Rosemary Radford Ruether: A Critical Introduction* (Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1988), 98.

47. Ruether, *To Change the World*, 2-3.

48. R. R. Ruether, *Disputed Questions: On Being a Christian* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 47.

49. Ruether, *Disputed Questions*, 60-71. Ruether henceforth critiques that even the recent scholarship in the search for historical Jesus “err[s] by perpetuating the basic Greek dualism between the inward and the outward, the spiritual and the social, time and eternity.” See Ruether, *To Change the World*, 11 for Ruether’s critique of Oscar Cullmann, Martin Hengel, and S. G. F. Brandon. See Ruether, “Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” 20-22. She also critiques the proleptic

understood as being “both political and religious, both transcendent and this-worldly, both inward and outward.”⁵⁰

Second, precisely because of his particularity, Ruether postulates that Jesus cannot serve as the archetypal paradigm for cosmic salvation: “Christians must affirm the particularity of Jesus, not only in gender, but also in ethnicity and in culture [W]e must recognize the limitations of any single individual to be universally paradigmatic.”⁵¹ Ruether’s second argument, in turn, grounds the meaning of the religious, transcendent, and inward dimensions of the Kingdom of God not on Jesus’ divinity or revelation from above but on Jesus’ paradigmatic or symbolic significance. Likewise, Ruether’s use of the term “prophetic” should not be taken as a divine message from above but as a speech that has the potential to create a liberating praxis for humans.

What, then, is Ruether’s account of Jesus’ messianic identity and role? Ruether begins with a disclaimer about Jesus’ incarnation as a divine-human being.⁵² She believes that the virginal conception/birth of Jesus is a story manufactured by the patriarchy. Their purpose was to shift the focus of Jesus’ birth-narrative from Mary to God so that God can be portrayed as the unilateral redemptive agent. Likewise, Ruether states that Jesus’ use of the “Son of Man” title had nothing initially to do with his divinity. Instead, translated as “a human being,” this term could have been attributed to any paradigmatic human figure such as the Davidic kings; the collective Israel; or “a circumlocution for oneself just as when Daniel himself is addressed as son of man.”⁵³ In Ruether’s assessment, the third alternative is the most plausible for understanding Jesus’ self-identification. She explains that Jesus identified himself as the “Son of Man” in order to set himself apart from Herod (the fox) and the Romans (the kites). Thus, the foxes have holes (palaces) and the kites

eschatologies of J. Moltmann and W. Pannenberg. She evaluates that R. Bultmann’s demythologizing existential hermeneutic is the most important for her theological method but critiques his works because there is still a dichotomy between the transcendent and immanent dimensions in his understanding of the *kerygma* of the gospel.

50. Ruether, *To Change the World*, 11. Emphasis hers.

51. Ruether, “Can Christology be Liberated,” 23.

52. R. R. Ruether, “What Do the Synoptics Say?: The Sexuality of Jesus,” *Christianity and Crisis* 38 (1978): 134.

53. Ruether, *To Change the World*, 14. Ruether cites Geza Vermes’s *Jesus the Jew* for the third interpretation of Daniel addressing himself as son of man. For a contrasting view than that of Ruether or Vermes, see Gerald O’Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 28, 32, 54-65, 116, 141.

their nests (fortresses), but Jesus the prophet is “a homeless wanderer in the present system of society.”⁵⁴

Ruether also claims that there is a great chasm between the orthodox christological confessions and the message Jesus had actually proclaimed and embodied in his life. In other words, Jesus cannot be thought of as being the final and fullest revelation of God precisely because he called his followers to continue with his messianic struggle against oppression. For Ruether, the significance of Jesus’ role in history stems from his act of renewing God’s “prophetic and redemptive activity taking place in the present-future, through people’s present experiences and the new possibilities disclosed through those experiences.”⁵⁵ In other words, Jesus is a symbol of the messianic hope yet to be realized in this world: “Jesus-is-the-Christ stands as an archetype, for us, of aspiring man who, in reaching for the Kingdom, lays claim to this present earth in such a way that the evil powers are already conquered in principle.”⁵⁶ At the same time, Ruether adds that there is also a sense in which Jesus is “*not* yet the Christ, . . . for there remained always the sense in which the content of this title [Christ] was deferred and vested in a future that has not yet come.”⁵⁷

Therefore, in Ruether’s view, Jesus was an iconoclastic social reformer/prophet who pointed to the “One who is to come,” but did not claim himself to be the Eschatological King.⁵⁸ Ruether is convinced that Jesus taught the Kingdom of God strictly as a future reality and that the proleptic eschatology is a theological embellishment created by Paul and further intensified by the Church’s theologians.⁵⁹ In other words, Jesus spoke of “a holistic vision of this world” to be established when “God’s will is done on earth.”⁶⁰ The Kingdom of God is not to be associated with a literal resurrection or eternal life but as a metaphor for God’s reign in an “egalitarian universe free of dualism and patriarchy.”⁶¹ Incorporating Jewish Jubilee and shalom in God’s reign, Ruether explains that in the time to come “the nexus of authentic creational life . . . [will] be

54. Ruether, *To Change the World*, 14.

55. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 122.

56. Ruether, “Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” 22.

57. Ruether, “Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” 22.

58. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 122-126.

59. Ruether, “Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” 18 and “Can Christology be Liberated,” 17.

60. Ruether, *To Change the World*, 11. See also R. R. Ruether, *The Radical Kingdom: The Western Messianic Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 185.

61. Ruether, *To Change the World*, 15.

reincarnated again and again in new ways and new contexts in each new generation."⁶²

As such, Ruether sees the Kingdom of God as a concrete socio-political establishment. She is convinced that Jesus did not "spiritualize" the Kingdom of God but rather "radicalized" the existing concept of it.⁶³ Based on this supposition, Ruether argues that Jesus' teachings against domination actually create implications beyond the immediate Roman occupation of Palestine and thus call to denounce all forms of systemic oppression against humanity. In other words, Jesus' message is to be understood as a sign of God's reign that has the potential to transcend Jewish ethnographical boundaries and as a call to perform justice and reconciliation between God and humanity, between individual persons, and between humanity and nature.⁶⁴

Specifically, Ruether charges Logos Christology of mistakenly identifying Jesus as the Second, "a subordinate and derivative" being in the Trinity to "set up a patriarchal relationship between the two 'persons' of God."⁶⁵ In actuality, Jesus used *abba* and subverted the authoritarian/monarchical concept of God in favor of an egalitarian depiction of God and community. Ruether calls this a form of *kenosis*. Furthermore, Ruether locates the highlight of Jesus' anti-establishment stance in how Jesus relates to women in the New Testament. She notes that Jesus' attitude toward women in the Synoptic Gospels shows "a startling element of iconoclasm" toward the patriarchal subjugation of women.⁶⁶ Against the social conventions of his time, Jesus kept close women companions and disciples such as Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna. Also, Jesus performed miracles for women's sake and advocated for their civil rights in marriage and divorce (Luke 24:10, 22-25; 7:36-50; 4:38-39; Mark 10:2-10; 1:30-31; and Matt 28:1).⁶⁷ Particularly, Martha's story in Luke 10:38-42 illustrates how Jesus "overthrows the traditional concept of women's place" in favor of equality.⁶⁸ Ruether, therefore, concludes that

62. Ruether, *To Change the World*, 56

63. Ruether, *To Change the World*, 15.

64. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 120.

65. Ruether, "Can Christology be Liberated," 9-10; Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 137; R. R. Ruether, *New Woman/New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 65-66.

66. Ruether, *New Woman*, 63, 64. Ruether states that Christianity's subscription to patriarchy has its origin in Greek culture, not particularly from Jewish.

67. Ruether, *New Woman*, 64-65.

68. Ruether, *New Woman*, 66.

Jesus' maleness does not impede against his ability to inspire and instill human triumph over all forms of injustice.⁶⁹

In final assessment, Ruether holds Jesus to be the Christ not because of his divine personhood or work but because she can see Jesus' potential to serve as "a radically new model for humanity" and as an "accessibly repeatable human uniqueness."⁷⁰ Ruether's Jesus, in other words, is an exemplary, paradigmatic figure who left "a new concept of leadership based on serving fellow human beings, even unto death," that his followers might do the same.⁷¹ For this reason, Jesus' teachings invite women in particular to "radicalize" his prophetic/liberating tradition and passionately advocate peace and justice for all in light of their own experience of oppression.⁷²

Conclusions

Although Rosemary Radford Ruether's feminist Christology seems to have very little resonance with Evangelical Christology, still her works make the following noteworthy contributions. Ruether's work acknowledges "the value and integrity of women's perspectives as valid presuppositions in theological construction."⁷³ As a feminist theologian, Ruether correctly points out that language has the power to generate presuppositions and implications to ontological beliefs about God and the human. Beliefs or theological/doctrinal assertions, in turn, reinforce the hermeneutical presuppositions favorably reflected in the Church's traditional theology and praxis. Although Ruether's disregard for the authority of the Bible is certainly problematic for Evangelical Christians, her sociological/ethical critiques aimed at traditional ways of doing theology with emphasis on rationalism and "spiritualizing tendencies" are valid to a degree.

Also, Ruether's work demonstrates well that ethics, especially social ethics, cannot be separated from theology. Her work aptly shows that Jesus' humanity must be contemplated and presented in ways tangible, inviting, and authentic to all people groups. Not only does her work provide evidences from Jesus' teachings that affirm women's personhood, but it also uncovers the negative psychological impact implicitly and explicitly carried in traditional christological models and assertions.

69. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 137.

70. Geoffrey R. Lilburne, "Christology: In Dialogue with Feminism," *Horizons* 11 (1984): 18.

71. Ruether, *To Change the World*, 15; Ruether, "Can Christology be Liberated?," 7.

72. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 31-32.

73. Snyder, *Christology of Ruether*, 24.

Lastly, Ruether's work engages the Christian tradition with other religious traditions, particularly Judaism.

Nevertheless, as this paper has illustrated, Ruether's use of Scripture is unapologetically selective and ideologically motivated, and her method of interpretation is unacceptable by those who take biblical exegesis seriously.⁷⁴ Using what can only be categorized as a radical reader-response hermeneutical method, Ruether categorically dismisses biblical texts she classifies as being patriarchal.⁷⁵ Ruether builds her Christology almost exclusively from the Synoptic Gospels, particularly the texts that are compatible with her utopian vision. Because her main objective is to extend Jesus' subversive socio-political mindset and actions against the patriarchy to all human societies, she intentionally does not consider Jesus in relation to the Old Testament prophecies or New Testament eschatology.

Particularly, Ruether's claim that certain portions of Scripture prescribes and promotes patriarchal ideology seriously overlooks the explicit redemptive message coherently and cohesively proclaimed by Scripture to address the entire human community, even to the extent of the cosmos (e.g., John 3:16; Col 1:15-20). Ruether's work limits Jesus' relevancy only to his message's capacity to overcome socio-political oppression because she rejects Jesus' Lordship as a form of hierarchicalism.⁷⁶ Her portrayal of Jesus as a paradigmatic symbol of humanity utterly fails to recognize that Jesus grounds freedom in his personhood and Lordship over the bondage of sin and death (John 8:31-36; 14:6).

Ruether, therefore, fails to work out the tension she creates between "Jesus' liberating ministry [repeatable in history] and the liberating work of God (i.e., possibly a transcendent and non-uniqueness)."⁷⁷ In the end, Ruether's Jesus can at best function as a conceptual or heuristic tool to cast a utopian vision of egalitarian society. In this way, Ruether's anthropocentric, liberal Christology mutates Christian eschatology into a form of humanistic secularism in which any notion of transcendence is eclipsed by immanence.⁷⁸

74. Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995), 164, 198.

75. Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 235-236.

76. Achtemeier, "Impossible Possibility," 54.

77. Lilburne, "Christology," 18.

78. Frederick Sontag, "Crucifixion and Realized Eschatology: A Critique of Some Proposals Concerning Feminist Theology," *Encounter* 51 (1990): 321.