
PRACTICING HOSPITALITY IN A TIME OF BACKLASH

LETTY M. RUSSELL

Each day, as we follow the political, social, and ecclesiological events of our nation and world, we see struggles between a variety of neoconservative groups and other groups that are more progressive and advocates of greater justice for diverse groups of people. We are in an age where those already marginal to the power structure of the society are being dis-empowered and blamed for their own victimization, with constant pressure to create laws that exclude and punish the weak. For instance, *The New York Times* reported recently that some persons are at work creating new barriers to immigration because the proportion of foreign-born persons living in the United States had risen to 8.8 percent. Others are pushing to have this country continue its heritage of welcome to immigrants and “foreigners.”¹ This is a time of what Susan Faludi has called *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. It is also the time of the same war against persons of color, gay and lesbian persons, poor persons, disabled persons, and just about any marginal group that we would want to name.²

What is the source of this “war against the marginalized” and how is this linked to religious sanctions for injustice and exclusion? I want to argue that the linkages may not all be clear, but it is clear that theological doctrines are implicated in the backlash and have to be rethought so that they are in the service of God’s intention to mend the creation. One of the church doctrines that is most suspect in this time of intolerance is that of election. In the face of growing possibilities of pluralism and diversity in

Letty M. Russell is Professor of Theology at Yale University Divinity School. Among her many books are *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (1993) and *Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Theology* (1987).

¹“A Surge in Immigration Surprises Experts and Intensifies a Debate,” *The New York Times*, Wednesday, August 30, 1995, p. 1.

²Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown, 1991), pp. xviii–xx.

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our society, the religious appeal to the doctrine of election of a particular people is often used as a divine sanction for uniformity rather than unity, and for privilege of one group rather than justice for many. In this way, it assists backlash in blaming the victims or the outsiders and justifying their exclusion.

Christian theologians who are committed to practicing God's hospitality and justice are called to develop a critical way of doing theology that makes sense to those who are marginalized and excluded by neoconservative rhetoric and actions, as well as responding with care to the challenges of the Christian Scripture and tradition. In this article, I want to highlight the context of backlash as an example of how feminist and liberation theologies must do their work to get at the roots of intolerance in Christian doctrines of the church. I will then examine how the tradition of election deals with diversity, advocating the importance of hospitality in diversity.

FEMINIST THEOLOGIES AND BACKLASH

It is often the hidden assumption of divine election to privilege and power that helps to reinforce backlash, as both church and society use paternalistic God-talk about unity in order to cover up fear of diversity and the loss of privilege. Susan Faludi has described this backlash in many different ways in her five hundred pages of documentation. In trying to summarize her description, I would say that backlash is a powerful counterassault on the rights of women of all colors, men of color, gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons, working-class persons, poor persons, and other less powerful groups both in the U.S. and abroad. In Faludi's words,

backlash [is] an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women. This counterassault is largely insidious: in a kind of pop-culture version of the Big Lie, it stands the truth boldly on its head and proclaims that the very steps that have elevated women's position have actually led to their downfall. . . . [This reaction] has been set off not by women's achievement of full equality but by the increased possibility that they might win it [and is an attempt to stop them and push them back into their subordinate role].³

The media feed this backlash by suggesting that women do not want equality, although polls continue to show that as high as 78 percent of women support the feminist movement and 57 percent say a strong women's movement is still needed.⁴ Permission for intolerance is evident in many different places as well; we read of (and experience directly) racial attacks, gay/lesbian bashing, antiabortion attacks on women's health centers, and anti-Semitism, along with racial, ethnic, and economic strife.

³Faludi, *Backlash*, p. xviii.

⁴CNN-*Time* poll, broadcast on February 29, 1992. Supporter of movement? 20% strong, 58% somewhat, 19% no.

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The struggle over whether Hillary Clinton should attend the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace, in September 1995 demonstrates just how difficult and complex this debate can become. Yet Hillary Clinton managed to make it clear in her speech that there is no such thing as human rights without the inclusion of women's rights. Advocacy of family includes rejection of all forms of injustice and violence against women and children.⁵

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Feminist and liberation theologies are seeking to work against backlash by advocating liberation rather than liberalism in their theological action and reflection. I understand feminist theology as a form of liberation theology that seeks to do theology from the perspective of advocacy of the full humanity of all women together with all men. In this understanding of progressive Christianity, the advocacy of justice and hospitality for all who are marginalized becomes the prism for critical interpretation of analysis, beliefs, and actions. In the light of this position, a great many Christian doctrines need to be reexamined to see if they assist in God's intention for the mending of creation or help to subvert this intention by introducing religious justification of the domination of one group over the many other groups in a pluralistic society.

The doctrine of election, as an indicator of divine preference, is often used to deny the diversity of our society and of the whole earth by closing out persons of different race, class, sexual preference, gender, or nationality. Such a pretense of unity through uniformity highlights the contradictions we face in talking about unity and diversity in the church. It raises the question of whether it is possible to take diversity seriously when our understanding of church unity and community is anchored in a tradition of divine election.

Diversity has to do with difference. It represents a description of the differences of race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, age, abilities, economic and political status, and much more that are part of the world in which we live. Many differences are God-given actions of creation and lend beauty and excitement to our world. Yet the connotation of difference seems to be that persons and groups who are not like us cause threat and discord to our way of life and our particular community.

⁵“First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton's Remarks for the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women,” Beijing, China, September 5, 1995. Text from <http://www.linnet.ca/linkages/women.html>.

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As Parker Palmer has pointed out in his book *The Company of Strangers*, communities are usually formed “by an act of exclusion—‘we’ are in and ‘they’ are out.”⁶ Some communities, like many black churches or the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, are formed because they have already been excluded, and they need to form a sense of identity in a situation of involuntary exclusion. But many other churches are formed to exclude persons of color, of a lower class, or of a different sexual orientation. As soon as they search out their identity through exclusion and putting others down, they not only are unable to welcome those who are different but also are caught in a community that survives by surrounding itself with walls. These walls frequently include myths and false information about those who are excluded, and they lead to a false sense of identity for those who say who they are by putting down others or admitting them only if they conform to the in-group’s cultural pattern.

In our competitive and capitalist society and in churches that are very much a part of this society, it is very difficult to resist a way of life in which certain persons are excluded as surplus, unneeded, inferior. In her essay “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” Audre Lorde says:

Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation.⁷

The institutionalized rejection of difference justifies the need for “surplus people” in a profit economy and leads us all to handle difference either by ignoring it or, if that is not possible, by copying it if we think it is dominant or by destroying it if we think it is subordinate.⁸

GOD’S HOSPITALITY AND THE CHURCH⁹

In what way does biblical and church tradition help or hinder the understanding of unity and diversity of churches seeking to advocate justice? As soon as we begin to take this question seriously in our theological investigation, we discover that the doctrine of divine election is, in many ways, ambiguous, if not contradictory, in its teaching of divine choice for service to the nations. Often the chosenness of the community manages to swallow up the mandate for outreach to others. In fact, the

⁶ Parker J. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America’s Public Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), p. 130.

⁷ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing, 1984), p. 115.

⁸ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, p. 115. See also Toinette M. Eugene *et al.*, “Appropriation and Reciprocity in Womanist/Mujerista/Feminist Work,” in *Feminist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, edited by Lois K. Daly (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), pp. 88–117.

⁹ For further development of this discussion of election, see my *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), chapter 5.

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doctrine of election itself may be one of the reasons it is so easy to practice unity without diversity.

At a Conference entitled "Gender, Race, Class: Implications for Interpreting Religions," Renita Weems raised a key question about racism and election that has led me to search for the way these two are interconnected, not only in her writings but also in those of Cain Felder and other biblical scholars particularly interested in the issues of election and community.¹⁰ A womanist perspective, Weems argues, must criticize theological and cultural assumptions and biases of the Bible by beginning with an analysis of election, for

the Bible's renown, I believe, is grounded in large part in the claim of Israel's (and later the Church's) election. Therefore, to identify the biblical world as patriarchal (or parochial, for that matter) is only to talk about symptoms. Those who have been excluded from Judeo-Christian theological discourse and structures must begin their work with an analysis of "election."¹¹

Jesus himself is part of this tradition of the chosenness of God's people and its need always to be broken open. Both the Gospels and Paul struggle with whether the teaching of Jesus about welcome into God's household is only for the Jews or for all people. One story that captures this tension in the ministry of Jesus is that of the Syrophenician woman who argues Jesus into healing her daughter. The story recorded in Mark 7:24-30 and again, with additions, in Matthew 15:21-28 is many layered, as are the history of its interpretation and the consciousness of its listeners. In different racial and cultural contexts, persons see quite different and unique aspects of the story of the woman who talked Jesus into healing her daughter by claiming the right to, at least, "the crumbs" under Israel's table! The story is similar to other Gospel narratives in its emphasis on the faith of the woman that leads to exorcism as well as to controversy and dialogue. In this case, however, the dialogue highlights a foreign widow's challenge to Jesus' understanding of hospitality and becomes good news to those who are considered "outsiders."

Out of its many layers, this story in Mark 7 provides several clues to a feminist reconstruction of the doctrine of election. It guards against the deformation of election into a narrow view of bounded community that excludes all the (so-called) others and denies the practice of God's hospitality.

(1) *Situation variable*. The story of the Syrophenician woman reminds us that the understanding of election, like that of salvation, is situation variable. This story is part of a long and evolving biblical tradition about

¹⁰Renita J. Weems, "The State of Biblical Interpretation: An African-American Womanist Critique," 1988 Spring Conference, May 16-18, Princeton Theological Seminary. See also Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989); Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986).

¹¹Weems, "The State of Biblical Interpretation," pp. 31-33 [unpublished manuscript]. Tapes of this lecture are available from Princeton Theological Seminary, along with the responses of Mary Ann Tolbert, Pheme Perkins, and Cain Felder.

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the meaning of God's choice of Israel as a light to the nations. Because the meaning of election changes over time, and in different contexts, we should not be surprised to find that happening in the Gospels. In the history of the church, the doctrine of election has fulfilled a need for identity as human beings in the world. Those who are nobodies affirm their own self-worth as children of God by claiming that God has chosen them and enabled them to live faithfully. In this sense, to be chosen of God is to be granted full human identity and worth as a gift of God's love. No wonder not only the tribes of Israel and the nobodies of the early church but also those in every culture who have been considered less than human or outcasts have found reassurance that God has chosen them as covenant partners. In this aspect, the idea of election enables communities to resist many different forms of oppression.

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For instance, the social factors in Calvin's struggles as a reformer in Switzerland, and the martyrdom of many of his followers, most certainly influenced his development of the doctrine of predestination to salvation through grace, but it soon became clear that this same teaching could be used as a powerful political weapon to expel those of a different faith. The trap of “either/or” logic led to the conviction that while some are foreordained to eternal life, others are foreordained to eternal damnation. A source of identity in the formation of a struggling community of faithful people quickly became deformed into a hierarchy of orthodoxy and exclusion by those who became the dominant political and religious leaders in Protestant areas of Europe and North America. In much the same way today, the history of South Africa demonstrates the power of the idea of election and exodus for white Afrikaner settlers, but this same myth of election has become a prime ingredient in the racist doctrines of state theology in its “justification of the status quo with its racism, capitalism, and totalitarianism.”¹²

This deformation of election combines the idea that election is a free gift of God's salvation and the idea that election is a form of privilege that justifies the exclusion and domination of others. A feminist reconstruction of election must avoid this deformation of the doctrine by insisting that its meaning is situation variable. What is a word of hope in the situation of the oppressed should not become a word of exclusion and privilege in the situation of a dominant group. Election provides a source of identity in a particular social-historical reality but becomes contradic-

¹²William H. Logan, ed., *The Kairos Covenant* (New York: Friendship, 1988), p. 9.

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tory when it is abstracted as a doctrine that is applicable in all realities. Without grounding in a reality of oppression, election quickly moves from a gift of grace to a justification of privilege and injustice.

(2) *Perspective of outsiders.* Secondly, the ministry of the Syrophoenician woman models for us the importance of understanding the gospel from the perspective of the outsiders, those marginal persons who are hungering and thirsting for that good news. In the history of the church, election has also pointed to the church's calling to witness and service. Here, the emphasis in biblical and church tradition has been on the task for which the community has been chosen. This aspect of election has received emphasis by twentieth-century theologians, for example, Karl Barth. Barth rightly criticizes Calvinist doctrine as unbiblical in its idea of a hidden decree of condemnation.¹³ Barth agrees with Calvin and most other Christian theologians that the grace of God is the only source of salvation. He emphasizes, however, that God's election is focused not just on a particular people but on the One who represents the chosen people, Jesus Christ. Jesus himself is both the Elected One and the One who, in his suffering, death, and resurrection, elects us all to faith and service.¹⁴

In the helpful way that he makes use of the tradition of Jesus Christ as the Chosen One, Barth moves away from the contradictions of election. If the One elected is Christ, then all have been elected through Christ and are called to respond in faith. The task of witness and service has been carried out by Christ, and those who follow do so as members of a community of witness and service. In Christ, God has created and chosen all humankind and taken the part of both those who are elected and those who were supposedly rejected.¹⁵

In my opinion, God's hospitality is seen in the choice of Israel and of Jesus to take on the task of becoming a light to the nations and of serving those in need. Those who see themselves elected with Christ through faith are called to take up his lifestyle of compassion and hospitality to neighbors in need. Just because Jesus is the Chosen One, we find ourselves practicing hospitality with God in the midst of the world (1 Tim. 3:16). God, who is free from us, has chosen to be free for us and, therefore, chosen solidarity with all humanity.

In a feminist reconstruction of election, it is important to follow the clues in Mark 7 and learn what it means to carry out the task of service by responding to those who define the need for us. If God has extended a welcome to all "outsiders," including ourselves, then we are called to practice hospitality by being for others, standing with them in their struggles, and understanding election from their perspective.

(3) *Unfolding meaning of God's promise.* The way in which Jesus is portrayed as changing his mind and learning new perspectives on his own ministry is a model for us as we seek to gain new perspectives on issues of

¹³Van A. Harvey, *A Handbook of Theological Terms* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), p. 188.

¹⁴Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1957), pp. 115-118.

¹⁵Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, pp. 351-353.

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chosenness and exclusion in the life of the church. Jesus' willingness to change models for all of us what it means to face the contradictions of our lives that serve to exclude our brothers and sisters.

In the history of the church, a third meaning of election, along with identity and service, has also been a way of pointing to God's promise. This important element of God's choice to covenant with a people is an alternative way of maintaining some of Barth's emphasis on the sovereignty of God. God is "free for us" yet always "free from us" and all our

"God is beyond our manipulation because God is the one doing the choosing, and those who respond in faith trust in a promise and not a guarantee of salvation."

idolatries and manipulations. Thus, although election seems like a doctrine that leaves no questions in the minds of the elect, the Reformers who taught election were also clear that they did not know the mind of God. They spoke of the gospel message in terms of promise and not guarantee, of certainty in God's promise and not security. They maintained that God's promise of forgiveness and salvation was never guaranteed. The offer of new life in God's household was made possible in Christ's death and resurrection, but we continue to live out our salvation and liberation in fear and trembling and in the expectation that, one day, we will be fully set free to be with God (Phil. 2:12).

This idea of the nature of God's promise serves as a safeguard against misuse of religious practices to "guarantee" that we are chosen. God is beyond our manipulation because God is the one doing the choosing, and those who respond in faith trust in a promise and not a guarantee of salvation. This leads us to a final clue to feminist reconstruction of election. God's promise is always open ended. We do not know all of its meaning and, like Jesus, have to keep on learning what it might mean. We need to be willing to change our understanding of election as new aspects of God's promise become clear to us. The future of that promise stands open and we can trust that there is more to come!

In all this talk of hospitality and diversity, it needs to be said that there are also *limits to hospitality*, because one is asked what it would mean to practice God's hospitality and to be open to that particular promise of the mending of creation. For Christians, this hospitality is limited or finds its definition in the story of the One in whose name we gather. Therefore, one of the limits of hospitality is commitment to Christ as the center of the life of the church. The stranger needs to be welcomed by a community that is able to practice hospitality. If a Christian community has no sense of its identity in Christ as the center of its life, it will not have a great deal of generosity and compassion to share with others. Just as persons cannot give themselves away to others if they have no sense of self-worth to share, churches with no sense of identity and worth have little to share. It

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is our identity in Christ who welcomes the stranger that leads us to join in the task of hospitality.

A second limit of hospitality is the promotion of justice for all women together with all men. Those groups or religious ideas that intend to promote patriarchal domination of all "outsider groups" have to be taken seriously, but a feminist perspective would not extend hospitality to their destructive intentions. The promise of God is understood in the light of God's concern for justice and the mending of creation and needs to be constantly reinterpreted in ways that might contribute to that vision of new creation.

A third limit of hospitality is commitment to mutuality with those on the margin who define what hospitality is needed. The practice of hospitality is just as subject to deformation and misuse as any other aspect of the life of the church. Like election, hospitality can be turned into a means of domination and prestige. This happens when those offering hospitality do so on their own terms instead of in dialogue with those who have been excluded or/and dominated.

Hospitality is an expression of unity without uniformity because unity in Christ has as its purpose the sharing of God's hospitality and justice with the stranger, the one who is "other."¹⁶ When God's call is to hospitality, the unity of the community still is distinct, because its task is distinct, but it sees itself not as the chosen "number one," but as "one in the many."¹⁷ As one in the many, the religious community can see itself as only one of many valuable pieces of the whole. Hospitality becomes a style of interaction with the other pieces that make up the whole of God's creation.

Judith Plaskow says in her book *Standing Again at Sinai*: "It is not in the chosenness that cuts off, but in the distinctiveness that opens itself to difference that we find the God of Israel and of each and every people."¹⁸ In the neoconservative age of backlash, ecclesial doctrines such as election must be revisited and reinterpreted in such a way that the good news of God's hospitality may be clearly expressed in the life of the church. This is no easy task, but it is crucial that we both talk and act in ways that proclaim God's welcome so that it is clearly heard by communities of great complexity and diversity. Perhaps, as we ourselves develop new perspectives on our traditions, we will find that *even we* are more welcome than we dared to believe!

¹⁶Thomas W. Ogletree, *Hospitality to the Stranger: Dimensions of Moral Understanding* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), pp. 1-2.

¹⁷In "Ella's Song," Bernice Johnson Reagon sings of "Not needing to clutch for power, not needing the light just to shine on me. I need to be one in the number as we stand against tyranny" (B. Johnson Reagon/Songtalk Pub. Co.). *We All . . . Everyone of Us*, sung by Sweet Honey in the Rock, Flying Fish Records, Inc., 1304 W. Schubert, Chicago, IL 60614.

¹⁸Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), p. 107.