

The Gender of God

A Theological Analysis

In the modern world, the subject of the gender of God has become a serious question. No longer can the faithful pastor appeal to the masculine terms identifying God as Father and Son as proof that God is masculine. Indeed, God is spirit (John 4:24) and, therefore, transcends human sexual distinctions. The various masculine personal pronouns (i.e., he, him, his) do not necessarily prove that God is masculine, for God is masculine only if the antecedents are masculine.

The Issue Defined

In the LCMS there are few who would deny the masculinity of God. But outside our church body, there is much current theological debate as to the question of God's gender. Unless we understand what is being said in the theological community around us, we will be ill prepared to handle the question when and if it camps at our door. The question being asked today is this: Can God be conceived of in feminine as well as masculine terms?

What is being asked is something that strikes at the very core of the Christian faith. For it raises anew questions about the nature of God and the Incarnation--doctrines which the early Church thought to be of such crucial importance that it formulated Nicene Theology and Chalcedonian Christology in order to protect itself from error.

C. S. Lewis believes that, when God is thought of in feminine as well as masculine terms, this amounts to heresy. He says:

Suppose . . . that we might just as well pray to "Our Mother which art in heaven" as to "Our Father." Suppose . . . that the Incarnation might just as well have taken a female as a male form, and the Second Person of the Trinity be as well called the Daughter as the Son. Suppose, finally, that the mystical marriage were reversed, that the church were the Bridegroom and Christ the Bride. . . .

Now it is surely the case that if all these supposals were ever carried into effect we should be embarked on a different religion.¹

Paul Jewett, the foremost spokesman for the feminist position, disagrees. He argues that theologians have ignored the feminine imagery about God which abounds in the Bible. He has developed a theology of God in which he conceives of God in masculine and feminine terms. This is not to say that he conceives of God as literally male and female. For he affirms that God "transcends sexual distinctions."² He means that God is to be *likened* to both a father and a

¹C. S. Lewis, "Priestesses in the Church?" in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed, Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans , 1970; reprinted, 1982), p. 237.

²Paul K. Jewett, *The Ordination of Women: An Essay on the Office of Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), p. 43.

mother. Jewett advances this argument in the context of the ongoing debate concerning the ordination of women. And for him, the interest in developing the theology of God as masculine and feminine is to counter what he understands to be the pervasive notion that the ministerial office has been denied to women for the reason that God himself is masculine.³

The Feminist Argument

The Image of God

For Jewett, the *sedes doctrinae* for the theology of God as masculine and feminine is Genesis 1:27: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them." He reasons that God must be like male and female because man in his image is specifically the fellowship of male and female. It will, at once, be perceived that Jewett understands the *imago Dei* in unorthodox terms, as being the fellowship of male and female.⁴ Jewett calls his understanding of the *imago Dei* a relational analogy. As he says, "The conclusion that God is equally like man and woman is simply the correlate of the truth . . . that men and women are equally like God, since he created humankind in his image as male and female."⁵ Masculinity and femininity, to his way of thinking, must be central to any proper conceptualization of *homo* or *Deus*. In terms of mankind, then, masculinity and femininity are to be seen as attributes; in terms of God, they are to be seen as analogical descriptions.

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Therefore, given that God can be described in this way, in either masculine or feminine terms, and given that biblical language about God is analogical, it follows that gender (in the human sense of the term) can never be applied to God. In the words of Jewett, ". . . God so transcends all sexual distinctions as to *be* neither male nor female. . . ." ⁶ For this reason he does not believe that the Trinitarian names, "Father" and "Son," reveal an essential masculinity. Instead, he says that these names show only "grammatical gender." To clarify this point, he offers the following explanation:

The word for "father," both in Hebrew and Greek, is masculine, as is the word for "son." But this no more implies the masculinity of the first and second Persons of the Trinity than the feminine word for "spirit" (*ru'ach*) or the neuter Greek word (*pneuma*) implies the femininity or neuterness of the third Person of the Trinity.⁷

³Jewett, *Ordination*, p. 29.

⁴The orthodox view is that the image of God consists in this, that God created Adam and Eve in holiness, without sin. The image of God, therefore, does not exist in unbelievers. It is partially restored in believers, to be fully restored in heaven.

⁵Jewett, p. 55

⁶Ibid, p. 124.

⁷Jewett, *Ordination*, p. 43.

Given this, that "Father" indicates only "grammatical gender," and also understanding that "God is as much like a mother as like a father, Jewett asserts that "there can be no sound theological objection to addressing God in prayer not only as our Father but also as our Mother, since both terms are used analogically."⁸

The Incarnation

In treating the doctrine of the Incarnation, Dr. Jewett raises the question whether, in the very nature of things, the second Person of the Trinity had to become incarnate as male humanity. In answering this question, he begins by restating the *analogia relationis*. That is, he asserts that God is equally like man and woman since he created humankind in his image as male and female.

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The trinitarian fellowship of the Godhead knows no male and female distinction, and the human fellowship of male and female knows no discrimination against the female as bearing the divine image to a lesser degree. Therefore, God's Incarnation in the form of male humanity is *theologically indifferent*.⁹

But Jewett is quick to point out that it is not "*historically and culturally indifferent*."¹⁰ What he means is that the historical moment and the Jewish culture into which God became incarnate necessitated that he become man in the particularity of the male. Stated in yet another way, God's self-revelation in the Person of the *male* Christ was due to his desire to accommodate himself to the contingencies of that particular time and place. As Dr. Jewett says:

. . . it is not difficult, given the character of Jewish culture, to perceive why God chose to enter our world as a first-century Jew rather than a first-century Jewess. In the strongly patriarchal society of Israel, where the father was the head of the family and the son the heir of the family, it was only fitting that God should have disclosed himself primarily

⁸Ibid., p. 159.

⁹Ibid., p. 55.

¹⁰Ibid.

under the name of *Father* (Jer. 3:9; Mal. 1:6) and should have said to him who came in his name, "Thou art my *Son*" (Matt. 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22).

. . . He [the Son of God] was crossing the line, coming from beyond time and place, into our history; this is the meaning of the Incarnation. Therefore, he could not ignore the actualities of the historical situation.¹¹

With this understanding, it is evident, then, that had the Christ "crossed the line" and entered into a different culture at a different time, the Incarnation might well have taken the form of female humanity. All this is simply to say that ". . . [it is] only in the nature of the historical situation, that both men and women should commit themselves to a *man* for their salvation."¹²

The Male Apostolate

Dr. Jewett does not dispute that all of the apostles were male. He does not believe, however, that, theologically speaking, they had to be. He contends that the apostolate was male for the same reason that Christ was male. He writes:

As the Incarnation in the form of male humanity can hardly be understood apart from the actualities of the historical situation, so it is also with the constitution of a male apostolate. . . . Though it is true that in Christ there is no male and female (Gal. 3:28), yet the apostles whom Christ commissioned had to preach in a world that knew male and female in terms of headship and submission, superiority and inferiority. . . . We should not be surprised, then, that Jesus chose only men to herald the truth of the gospel in the Greco-Roman world of the first century.¹³

Professor Jewett also points out that, in addition to their maleness, Christ and the apostles had yet another thing in common, namely, their Jewishness. Did the apostles have to be Jewish? The professor answers in the affirmative. Once again, however, it is a matter of cultural contingencies. On the basis of this, he says:

But if no one would reason that because Jesus and the original apostles were all Jews, therefore the Christian ministry should be Jewish to perpetuity, why reason from the fact that they were all men to the conclusion that it should be male to perpetuity?¹⁴

This question, from Dr. Jewett's perspective, is crucial, for it is his contention that the church has not been consistent. On the one hand it has reasoned that maleness is so significant that women may not be ordained. But, on the other hand, it has determined that Jewishness is of little or no consequence so that Gentiles may freely seek ordination. As a matter of fact, he notes that Gentiles were ordained as successors of the apostles, e.g., Titus.

¹¹Jewett, *Ordination*, pp. 55-56.

¹²Ibid. p. 56.

¹³Jewett, p. 59.

¹⁴Ibid.

A Rebuttal The Theological Necessity of God's Masculinity

Dr. Jewett is correct when he says, "God so transcends all sexual distinction as to *be* neither male nor female."¹⁵ He affirms here precisely what Jesus himself states, namely, that "God is spirit" (John 4:24). Jewett goes too far, however, when he asserts that God is analogically *both* masculine and feminine. For to admit a feminine element into the Godhead (even in an analogical way) is to alter the very nature of the Christian faith. Let us see why this is so.

If it be asked what it is that makes Christianity unique, the answer lies in the fact that the God

And this "givingness" is not something that is peripheral to his nature; it is essential: it defines who he is. Moreover, it is precisely in this "givingness" or what may also be termed "generativeness," that God is analogically masculine and not feminine. Stated differently, the givingness of God, upon which the Christian faith depends is to be viewed in exclusively masculine terms.

of Christian revelation, in contradistinction to the gods of virtually all other religions, is One who is characterized by what C. Kilmer Myers calls "givingness."¹⁶ That is to say, the Christian deity, by his very nature, continually *gives* to his creation. He gave life and the means to sustain it during the hexaemeron. He continues to give and sustain life to this day. And most important of all, he gave his only-begotten Son to redeem fallen mankind, and even now sends the Holy Spirit to convert and to sanctify. Clearly, if God had not begotten, i.e., if he had not given (even as he begets and gives today), there would have been no creation, no life, no Incarnation, and certainly no Christian faith. But God does give. *And this "givingness" is not something that is peripheral to his nature; it is essential: it defines who he is.* Moreover, it is precisely in this "givingness" or what may also be termed "generativeness," that God is analogically masculine and not feminine. Stated differently, the givingness of God, upon which the Christian faith depends is to be viewed in exclusively masculine terms. To clarify, it will be helpful to examine Table 1.

As this table shows, in terms of generativeness, there is a precise analogy between God and the human male. That is to say, "givingness" is uniquely ascribed to both God and men, to the former in terms of that which is *creative*, to the latter in terms of that which is *procreative*. As God gives life to his creation, so the human male gives his seed in procreation. Both God and the human male beget; the both initiate; and they are both active. On the other hand, they are never receptors; they are never passive; and they never await. All of these latter characteristics are the province of creation and the human female alone.

To those who would argue that this analogy breaks down because the human female is, indeed, active in the sexual act, we would respond by saying that the focus is not upon the *actions* of the male and female, but upon the *nature* of procreation itself whereby the male can only give seed

¹⁵Jewett, *Ordination*, p. 124.

¹⁶C. Kilmer Myers, "Should Women Be Ordained?" *The Episcopalian*, February 1972, p. 8.

and the female only receive it. It would be utterly impossible to reverse the direction of generation. For just as it is impossible for creation to give life to God, so it is likewise impossible for the female to give seed to the male.

TABLE 1

Generativeness: The Analogy of Masculinity
God and the Human Male

Generativeness in Detail

THE THEOLOGICAL DIMENSION		THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL DIMENSION	
GOD	CREATION	MALE	FEMALE
Gives	Receives	Gives	Receives
Begets	Is Begotten ^a	Begets	Conceives ^a
Active	Passive	Active	Passive
Initiates	Awaits	Initiates	Awaits
Masculinity	Femininity	Masculinity	Femininity
Direction of Generation →		Direction of Generation →	

^aAnd Subsequently Bears Fruit

Generativeness, then, is predicated of both God and the human male *intrinsically*. That is, this is not merely an analogy pertaining to an external attribute or action, but it is one pertaining to an attribute which is intrinsic to both God and the male. It is important to note, therefore, that we are dealing with an analogy that is focused at the level of being, i.e., at the level of ontology. And it is not beside the mark to say that, by means of this analogy, there is a kind of "ontological linking" between the male and God. To say this, however, is not to undermine God's transcendence, for we maintain that generativeness can only be predicated of men in a derivative or secondary sense, whereas it is predicated of God absolutely as the *ens primum*. In using the term "ontological linking" we are simply (yet most emphatically!) asserting that generativeness is *uniquely* intrinsic to God and the human male. To no others can one predicate this. God is thus *analogically* male, and *ontologically* masculine!

Some would argue that this linkage could equally well be ascribed to the male of any species, for all males, whether they be dogs or people, possess generativeness. Logically, this is a valid argument, but theologically it is not, for God's theological interest is focused on mankind. Man was created to have kingly rule over creation (Genesis 1:28); he was to have dominion over all created things. Creation's responsibility, then, is to man. Man alone is responsible to God.

Scripture speaks of God's dealings with man, not with that which is subhuman. God sent his Son who became incarnate *as a man* to save *man*. That is to say, God's generativeness is theologically centered on the human race. In terms of the analogy, then, we must insist that it be personal, i.e., it must deal only with persons (viz., God and the human male), if such an ontological linkage is to be established.

To restate what has been said above, in terms of that which is fundamental, unique, and essential to the Christian faith, viz., givingness or generativeness, the human male is the precise analog of God.¹⁷ The converse is also true: God is analogically male (and not female). Now since this analogy concerns an attribute which is intrinsic to both God and men, and since it is personal, we must assert that there is an ontological link between them. And on a broader level, it can be said that, in analogical terms, God relates as masculine toward his creation in the same way that the human male relates as masculine toward the female of his species.

Given this understanding, it is clear that to introduce a feminine element into the Godhead would be to change God's nature from One who is all-giving to One who is dichotomous, i.e., all-giving, yet all receiving; totally active, yet totally passive; begetting, yet begotten. Surely, this is not the God of biblical revelation.

Clearly, then, to describe God in exclusively masculine terms is to describe God properly. *In fact, to affirm that God is analogically masculine is to do nothing less than to state the gospel!* That is to say, the fundamental teaching of Scripture is that God *gave* his Son to save the world. And, as we have noted above, this givingness on the part of God is masculine by analogy. In addition, since man, as a created being, is always passive with respect to God, this, too, affirms

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what Scripture teaches, namely, that man can never--not even in the slightest degree--save himself.

Problems with Jewett's Christology

¹⁷This should not be construed to mean that the female is somehow inferior to the male. Scripture itself prohibits this notion (Gen. 1:27). The point under discussion is God's masculinity, not the ontic equality of the sexes. And here we must affirm that God is analogically male. That the male is the precise analog of God is borne out biblically. God did not bypass Adam's generativeness when he made Eve. Eve was made from Adam, from his rib, and not by a separate, independent creative act. Eve, then, is the precise analog of creation, in this case Adam, the first created. I Corinthians 11:7 reflects this kind of thinking: ". . . he [the man] is the image and glory of God, but the woman is the glory of man."

From what has been said above, it is evident that Dr. Jewett errs when he contends that God is to be likened to both a male and a female. And since errors with respect to the Godhead invariably manifest themselves in the Christological dimension, it will be instructive to observe how Jewett's doctrine of God affects his doctrine of Christ.

Orthodox Christology holds that, in the person of Christ, true deity and true humanity must coexist. That is, Jesus must be both true God and true man. But if, in accordance with Jewett's teachings, a feminine element is introduced into the Godhead, orthodoxy can no longer be maintained. For if God were analogically feminine as well as masculine, the former, because of its passivity, could *not* participate in the generative act of incarnating the eternal Word. Only that which is masculine, and thereby active, could effect generation. Jesus, then, could only be a reflection of that which is masculine and not that which is masculine and feminine. One could, in other words, never establish Jesus' consubstantiality with God. Indeed, carrying this argument to its logical conclusion, Jesus could never be God!

If, moreover, Jesus were not true God (i.e., if he were less than God), then the atonement would have been unsatisfactory, for he would have been unable to render perfect obedience to the Law. Hence, his death would have been an unsatisfactory propitiation for sin.

But even if we do not argue from the generative analogy, i.e., if we ignore the concept of activity and passivity, Jewett still has a similar Christological problem: he cannot demonstrate that Jesus is the incarnate *logos*, for if, as Dr. Jewett holds, that God is both masculine and feminine, then the incarnate *logos* must reflect this. That is, if, as the apostle Paul says, all the fullness of the deity dwells in Christ bodily (Col. 2:9), then the true Word-become-flesh must be both male and female, i.e., androgynous (or, perhaps, twins?). But who, then, was Jesus? He was, by all accounts, male humanity. He was not androgynous. If, then, God were both masculine and feminine, and if the Word-become-flesh was male, Jesus did not reflect the intrinsic essence of the Godhead. He must, therefore, have been someone who imperfectly represented God ("him and her")! The Jesus of Paul Jewett--no matter how vigorously he may deny it--could only *claim* to be the true Word. And, once again, since he would not have been consubstantial with God, he could not have been true God.

Dr. Jewett could, of course, argue that, even though Jesus seemed to be only a male, he was, in reality (i.e., according to essence) both male and female. This argument, however, amounts to anthropological docetism, the view that Jesus was something other than what he appeared to be. In point of fact, this view is nothing more than a modern refinement of that early docetic heresy which the Church of the second and third centuries fought so valiantly to resist.¹⁸ Docetism, no matter what its form, is always heretical because it asserts that the true God could never have become incarnate as true man.

It is clear, then, that Jewett is in an indefensible position, for no matter which way he turns, his doctrine of God (as masculine and feminine) leads to an heretical Christology. If he claims that

¹⁸Docetism was associated mainly with the gnostic heresy.

Jesus was truly a male (which is his stated position), then it follows that Jesus was not true God, a lapse into Arianism. On the other hand, if he would claim that Jesus was actually androgynous, though he appeared as male humanity, then Jesus only seemed to be true man, when, in reality, he was androgynous, a lapse into docetism. It seems clear, that Jewett's view of God and Christ is similar in many respects to what the early Church had to fight against. It is nothing more than a refinement of early heresies.

The Christological Argument for God's Masculinity

The very fact that Jesus was male argues for God's exclusive masculinity. In order to avoid heresy, it is necessary to uphold the consubstantiality of Jesus with the Godhead. This being the case, the true deity must be analogically masculine and not feminine. Indeed, Scripture itself speaks of Jesus in consubstantial terms. Our Lord, for example, said, "I and the Father are one [*hen*]," (John 10:30), a clear reference to the unity of essence of the incarnate *logos* and the Godhead. Perhaps even more interesting is his statement to Philip: "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). These words imply consubstantiality. Certainly it would have been difficult for Philip to look at Jesus and conceive of the Father in anything but masculine terms! Most convincing also, is the assertion in Hebrews 1:3, that "the Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation [*charakter*] of his being" (NIV).

Jewett, of course, claims that the maleness of Jesus is not revelatory of God's masculinity. For him, Jesus' maleness was merely an historical accident: he could have been a female in a different culture. But Jewett ought to reconsider his argument. Not only is his Christology intrinsically heretical, but he ignores the fact that God himself chose the very culture and time in which his Son was to become incarnate.¹⁹ This latter point needs to be emphasized over against Jewett, for, since God chose the very culture that Jewett thinks determined Christ's maleness, then, when all is said and done, our Lord's maleness was divinely ordained from the beginning. If God were not exclusively masculine, he certainly should have chosen a different, more neutral culture for the Incarnation to take place, for example, Greek culture where androgyny would not have been offensive at all! This is the very least we should expect from a God who does not deceive and who cannot lie (Titus 1:2).

Soli Deo Gloria!

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¹⁹See Susan Foh, *Women and the Word of God: A Response to Biblical Feminism* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1979), p. 93.