

## PLAYING GAMES AND LIVING METAPHORS: THE INCARNATION AND THE END OF GENDER

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Varying concepts of gender provide one of the major fronts in the culture war being waged in our day. We live in a time when the meaning of maleness and femaleness is being creatively renegotiated by forces larger than any particular individual or group. Essentially, traditional notions of gender are being largely rejected and replaced by egalitarian notions, though the replacement can vary significantly depending on whether the individual is shaped more by an equity feminist model (implying androgyny with no distinctive gender ideal) or a gender feminist model (kinder and gentler is better).<sup>1</sup> Regardless, new understandings of gender are gradually becoming assumed by many in our culture, and the Christian community is not unaffected.

The question facing the Church is (as always in such eras): Just how far do we go in our participation in this cultural movement? That the Church could reap some benefits from a renewed model of gender conceptions should be obvious. Changes that have already occurred have made it possible for Christian women to be employed in many occupations that social convention did not formerly permit. Furthermore it has challenged the Church to move beyond an unreflective reliance upon tacit, traditional assumptions about gender and receive afresh the Word of God on this subject.

The Church's problem is that gender is not simply a social construction.<sup>2</sup> There is a reality that both underlies and stands beyond the referent. Everyone must agree that there are at least biological differences that cannot be simply reinterpreted<sup>3</sup> (though the significance of those differences surely can be). The Christian, however, believes that beyond this world is a God

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<sup>1</sup> See C. H. Sommers, "Feminism and the College Curriculum," *Imprimis* 19/6 (June 1990), and K. Pollitt, "Are Women Morally Superior to Men?", *Utne Reader* (September/October 1993), for two popular discussions of these approaches.

<sup>2</sup> Though this is by no means agreed upon by all. For example, in one of the most comprehensive evangelical feminist works M. S. Van Leeuwen, A. Knoppers, M. L. Koch, D. Schuurman and H. M. Sterk, *After Eden: Facing the Challenge of Gender Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), seem to assume that gender is essentially a cultural construction, given their lack of interest in the biological side of gender and the lack of revelationally-based gender ideals that they offer.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Masculinity/Femininity* (ed. J. M. Reinisch, L. A. Rosenblum and S. A. Sanders; New York: Oxford University, 1987); *Behavioral Endocrinology* (ed. J. B. Becker, S. M. Breedlove and D. Crews; Cambridge: MIT/Bradford, 1992).

who made it, and she also believes that Christians should think about this world the way that God does. Consequently when considering gender she desires more than conformity to whatever the crowd constructs. She wants to know what the crowd is supposed to construct. This is especially important for gender because it is a human phenomenon requiring a complex confluence of formative processes, not unlike morality. While gender is rooted in biological realities, God has given culture some of the responsibility to shape gender. But this influence is in turn to be shaped by divine revelation concerning the phenomenon.

The purpose of the present article is to explore some aspects of the incarnation that may provide some normative hints about gender for Christians. For the Christian, the incarnation is obviously one of the central events of all time. The Christian faith is founded upon the truth that God became human. The narratives recording this event, however, involve agents whose gender seems to be at the heart of the story.

#### I. THE MOTHER OF GOD

First, Jesus had a mother. God could have come as a preformed child, found, like Superman, in a field somewhere—arriving not from Krypton but from heaven. Or God could have immediately created a whole body, as he did with Adam when he formed his flesh out of the dust. (In fact, had Christ been made an adult human it would have provided a more exact corollary with the first head of the human race; cf. 1 Cor 15:45.)

But God chose a more time-consuming process of human formation: In solidarity with this human race, God entered this sphere of reality in the womb of a human creature, in an organ possessed by only half of the human race. Before God slept in a manger, God slept in a womb. For nine months the Creator was kept alive by a creature in a site of nourishing protection, dependent on Mary's care—the food she ate, her digestive system, her blood.

I believe Charles Williams once wrote that the reason for the creation was that God might become a creature. Perhaps we can similarly speculate that the primary reason for the womb was that in the fullness of time it would be the first earthly home for the Son of God. Had Christ come preformed, found by a pair of human parents, perhaps the equality of gender would have been underscored. Instead he singled out womanhood to have a special role in his first coming. In fact no human male had any direct role in that coming. The only humanity involved was a woman.

After his birth Jesus presumably received nourishment from Mary's breasts. (Though not mentioned in the Biblical text, it seems very likely.) If so, then the baby Jesus would have fed upon his mother's body, receiving his first extra-uterine nourishment not directly from food harvested from the soil or from an animal's flesh but out of his mother from special lifegiving glands created for such a purpose. Again, a creature would be giving life to the Creator—but not just any creature. It would have been upon a human female that he lived. Perhaps the primary reason for breasts was that in the fullness of time a pair of them would nourish the Son of God.

Jesus had a human mother. What could be the significance for gender conceptions in the woman's participation in Christ's first coming? In the absence of direct Scriptural teaching on the subject, our conclusions must be speculative.<sup>4</sup> One is hard pressed, however, to think of a more profound way of underscoring the unique gift of childbearing. Mary as woman illustrates the essential link of biology and gender that is often minimized in feminist discussions. Mary brought into the world the Son of God, and mothers, with just a little help at conception, bring into the world the next generation of men and women. Men are not equal to women in this way. Men are largely passive observers of one of the most profound processes in creation: human generation. Males and females do most things about as well, but no matter how motivated, men are excluded from bearing and breastfeeding children. Furthermore in most cases maternal experiences make possible a unique bond between the mother and the infant to which the father (like Joseph) is not privy. Possessing a womb and breasts provides the biological basis for a singular interpersonal experience that in turn paves the way for a special relationship with and ministry to one's children. God has permitted culture to contribute to the shaping of many of the particularities of gender. But he has created woman and man with distinct organs, body forms, and hormonal influences that provide some of the ordained structure of gender with which culture is left to work. The Church should not disregard this structure in its reasoning about gender.

At the same time a number of qualifying observations should be made. First, none of the foregoing provides any sanction for uninvolved fathers. Fathers have their own unique, indispensable role to play in the family. Second, nothing that has been said forces one to the traditional belief that a woman's place is solely in the home. Recognizing the unique gifts of the woman need not lead to a minimizing of the capacities of women in all the other areas of human experience that they share with men. Finally, the foregoing should not lead to the traditional assumption that women without children are inferior. Many women are not called to childrearing. Such women (and men) are freed from family responsibilities to serve God in other equally valuable ways. As is well known, Paul suggests that the unmarried life is to be preferred for the sake of the kingdom, and presumably this also applies to the childless life. The Christian concept of call frees individuals from illegitimate shame at not fitting into traditional stereotypes.

Women ought not to be defined solely or even primarily by their unique, childbearing abilities. But contrary to the monotonic egalitarian themes of

<sup>4</sup> Though Protestants have not inquired so much into Mary's significance, it is well known that the Roman Catholic tradition has long sought to understand her symbolic importance (cf. G. von le Fort, *The Eternal Woman* [Milwaukee: Bruce, 1962]). Interestingly P. K. Jewett interacts briefly with this work's views in *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 171-188. He presents as its main themes that Mary stands as the symbol of womanhood as well as humanity in her complete submission to the will of God, which in her case involved the bearing of the Christ child. Jewett is suspicious that this approach still favors the preeminence of the male (the Son) and reinforces the passivity of the female role in human relations. His brief criticisms, however, do not really challenge von le Fort's case that Mary provides a unique symbol of womanhood and its significance for the Christian community.

modern feminism, childbearing is a special gift to women (in general) that brings with it a special responsibility to those so called (as do all gifts) and requires a certain joyful appropriation that cannot be neglected without leading to greater harm to the whole race. Mary's special call to bear the Christ child, then, may point to something acknowledged by virtually all premodern societies: Women have a preeminent role in the creation and nurture of children, and this role usually continues to positively shape family relations throughout their lives.

## II. THE FATHER OF GOD

But there was another parent involved in the incarnation. Jesus had a father. Of course I am not speaking about Joseph, who was truly a marginal figure in the incarnation. His place in the incarnation narrative consists of his alarmed response to the news that he was to have no role in the coming of Jesus at all. Joseph was important as an earthly stepfather, but he was not a direct participant in Christ's first coming. He was a spectator—uniquely at conception and then, like all men, throughout the rest of the pregnancy.

The true father of Jesus was a heavenly father. The Holy Spirit came upon Mary, and the power of the Most High overshadowed her (Luke 1:35), so that Mary was with child by the Holy Spirit (Matt 1:18). Mysteriously, God took the role that is normally that of a human male: the impregnation of a woman<sup>5</sup> (the only role the male plays in the reproductive process). As is the case in all of God's creative activity, the entire Trinity was involved in the process. The Holy Spirit was the effecting, personal power that brought about the union of divinity and humanity in the person of Christ according to the purpose of the Father. Simply put, God was the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Beginning as early as twelve years of age, Jesus was keenly aware that he had a special relationship with a special Father. On the way back from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Mary and Joseph discovered that their son had not returned with them. When they found him in the temple courts his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us this way? Your father and I have been anxiously looking for you." But Christ answered, "Why is it that you were looking for me? Did you not know that I had to be in my Fa-

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that the language of the Scriptures implies that the act was unique in all of history. Contrary to pagan accounts of male gods who had sex with females that led to offspring (e.g. Romulus or Hercules), and contrary to the teachings of the Mormon church about Christ's conception, there was no physical intercourse between God and Mary. She remained a virgin until Christ was born (Matt 1:25). The divine "overshadowing" places the virginal conception in a realm qualitatively distinct from male-female intercourse. The term for "overshadow," *episkiazein*, does not imply anything of a physical, sexual encounter (see R. E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* [Garden City: Doubleday, 1977] 290–291). Rather, it suggests the manifestation of God's spiritual presence. Earlier when it says that Mary is with child "by the Holy Spirit" (v. 18) the implication is simply that the Holy Spirit was "the agency of God's creative power" (Brown, *Birth* 137). Perhaps, then, we can speculate that the other twenty-three chromosomes necessary for Christ's human life were created *ex nihilo* and implanted directly into the egg in Mary's womb.

ther's house?" (Luke 2:48–49). At a young age Christ was beginning to recognize that his real Father was Yahweh. His supernatural Father was in heaven, and Jesus wanted to listen to and speak with those who knew his real Father best. But Jesus in turn amazed the teachers of Israel, presumably by knowledge he already possessed of his real Father and his real Father's ways.

It is likely that the awareness of his own unique relationship with his Father God lay at the foundation of one of the central themes of his teaching ministry: God is also the Father of all believers. While many of Jesus' uses of the term "father" for God are personal ("my Father") and many others refer generally to "the" Father, Jesus specifically taught his disciples that God was their Father too. For example, he taught them to pray to their Father in heaven (Matt 6:9) and to be perfectly loving, as their heavenly Father was (5:48). Over twenty-five times in the gospels Christ referred to God expressly as the Father of his hearers ("your Father"). Jesus' postresurrection statement to another Mary brings out clearly the fatherhood of God for Christ and the believer, while yet drawing a distinction between them: "I ascend to my Father and your Father, and my God and your God" (John 20:17).

Yet some are suggesting that we should be free to call God our "Mother."<sup>6</sup> Perhaps our first task is to ask that age-old question: "What would Jesus have done?" The only possible response is that from his own perspective such an appellation would be completely invalid. His mother was a human female. The supplier of the other half of his chromosomes was the Creator of the universe. We could not call God "Mother" in imitation of Jesus.

Perhaps, however, the option to call God "Mother" remains open to us who do not have Christ's unique relationship to God. But at this point we have to ask on what grounds we would be warranted in making such a move. Obviously if the Scriptures referred explicitly to "your Mother" or at least "your Parent" in heaven we could make the move. Yet nowhere does this kind of statement occur. As Christian feminists have pointed out,<sup>7</sup> Scripture shows God to have traditionally feminine characteristics as well as masculine, and on a few occasions the Scriptures suggest that he is like a mother. But these qualifications do not seem to provide sufficient justification for resisting the overwhelming emphasis in Christ's teaching on this point.

It could be argued that Christ was constrained by the opportunities afforded him by the Jewish culture in which he taught. In response, however, one should consider the origins of Christ's culture, since Yahweh, through Moses and the prophets, did not deem it appropriate to alter Israel's conceptions of himself as masculine. There were plenty of female deities in the pagan religions of that time that provided alternative-gender conceptions of deity. It seems plausible that God could have incorporated these conceptions into the

<sup>6</sup> Cf. V. R. Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* (New York: Crossroad, 1988); S. McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. e.g. L. Scanzoni and N. Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be* (Waco: Word, 1975); Mollenkott, *Divine*; E. Storkey, *What's Right with Feminism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

revelation of himself had he chosen to, just as he did other aspects of the culture of that day (e.g. the concept of covenant).<sup>8</sup>

Moreover those who hold to the finality of the NT Scriptures and the role of Christ as the ultimate Word of God are likely to find that a cultural solution creates far more problems than it solves. His personal relations with women were certainly nontraditional. To suggest that he was tradition-bound regarding revelation about God undermines his prophetic credibility in general. Without express teaching in the Bible promoting the motherhood of God we would do well to avoid such expressions.

Nevertheless it is essential to clearly affirm, as the Church has done down through the ages, that God intrinsically transcends gender, and that for a number of reasons. (1) It is in the nature of things that God transcends his creation. No facet of God's creation can be allowed to define him absolutely. He is more than a father, just as he is more than a shepherd.<sup>9</sup> These metaphors simply point to a truth about God. They are not his essence. God the Father is not male; he reveals himself as "male." If we do not avoid this kind of error, we fall into a type of idolatry (a type that males can self-servingly practice, which in turn corrupts their whole approach to this subject). (2) God is spirit. It would be ludicrous to suggest that the invisible, everlasting God is physically male. That has the smell of pagan myth. Furthermore, (3) males and females together fully constitute the image of God (Gen 1:27), suggesting that God is most fully revealed through males and females. (4) The Holy Spirit is not revealed in gender-specific ways. This also seems to suggest that God is not intrinsically gender-bound. (5) The incarnation narratives contain within themselves limits to which the masculinizing of God can go. The term "overshadow" contains no sexual connotations. Such a term carefully distinguishes God's act from the masculine role in intercourse (though, significantly, it did accomplish the same end). The overall force of these arguments suggests that the case for an intrinsically male Christian God is untenable as well as repugnant.<sup>10</sup>

Christ, however, knew God as his real Father and taught that he was our Father as well. Moreover Christ's own experience of his Father is itself directly relevant to his disciples, for we all—male and female—enter into union with Christ through faith and become one with him. "In that day," Christ said, "you shall know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you" (John 14:20). Because we are united to Christ, we too look upon God as our Father. It would seem that the only legitimate course open to the Christian willing to submit to Scripture is that Christ's teaching to the disciples about God the Father was normative.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. M. G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

<sup>9</sup> R. A. Tucker, *Women in the Maze: Questions and Answers on Biblical Equality* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), makes this point.

## III. THE SON OF GOD

But there was one more agent in the narratives of the incarnation: Jesus. And again we are confronted with gender. God chose to come in the form of a human male. I say chose for two reasons: (1) God is sovereign and does what he wants. He is not limited in his actions by his creation. (2) Christ's sex was clearly not left to chance because in the divine overshadowing of Mary, God supplied the precise chromosome that determined the child's gender.

How else could Christ have come? To name the one obvious alternative: as a female. Would that not powerfully underscore to the Jews of that day some of the servant themes of his ministry? Some have objected that this option was not available to Christ because the Jewish culture of that day would not have accepted it.<sup>11</sup> But besides the problem mentioned above that God had earlier shaped Jewish culture,<sup>12</sup> this explanation for Jesus' gender contains a more serious problem. This objection implies that God's choice of the gender he would take on was subject to the cultural conventions of his creatures, conventions that the Christian feminist argues are inherently unjust. Such a concession on Moses' part can be seen in the OT (cf. Matt 19:8) but seems uncharacteristic of the coming of the Son who is the fullest revelation of God (Heb 1:3; 2 Cor 4:4; Col 2:19) and who came in the fullness of time as he had chosen to do from before the foundation of the world (1 Pet 1:20). To suggest that any facet of the most important event in human history and in God's redemptive plan was shaped by concession to human blindness and sin seems far beneath the high and holy purposes of the Sovereign of the universe who does as he wishes among the people of the earth (Isa 43:13; Dan 4:35; Eph 1:11).

How else could God have come to earth? There are at least two ways that would have underscored gender equality. First, one can imagine the Messiah coming as fraternal twins, both male and female. Or perhaps Christ

<sup>10</sup> Here most Christian feminists and traditionalists are agreed; cf. S. Foh, *Women and the Word of God* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979); R. A. Tucker and W. L. Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church: Women and Ministry from New Testament Times to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987). What usually separates them is the significance they accord the masculine pronouns and "father" terms used for God in the Bible. For example, Tucker (*Women* 14) is satisfied with Scanzoni and Hardesty's conclusion that since God is a person it was necessary to refer to him as some gender, and we use the masculine pronoun to refer to persons generically. Apparently we are not to derive any genuine significance from the masculine pronoun. It is conventional, not revelational. Similarly Tucker suggests (*Women* 20–21) that mother and father have equal value as images for God, though she acknowledges that the Bible does not say we ought to pray: "Our Mother in heaven." Tucker is to be commended for at least this acknowledgment, but nothing is made of it. Instead she suggests that using "mother" in reference to God is as legitimate as using "shepherd." The difference, however, lies in precedents that Scripture has provided. We can agree that it is not blasphemous to refer to God as mother. But Scripture is drawing us to think of God in a certain way and, as V. Eller suggests (*The Language of Canaan and the Grammar of Feminism* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982]), part of our Christian calling is to follow that lead.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. e.g. Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All* 55; Jewett, *Man* 168.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. here Foh, *Women* 158–160.

could have come as a hermaphrodite, having both male and female characteristics. There may be theological arguments against such comings, but they are not logically inconceivable. But Christ did not come in such forms. Why did he come in a form that would prove to be so scandalous and divisive in the future?

Again, however, to better understand the significance of that choice we need to go back further. Why did God make genders at all? There are many creatures in the world that are hermaphroditic—that is, they can fertilize other members of their species as well as bear progeny themselves. If God wanted a thoroughgoing equality among humans this would have been the way to go. Must we not conclude that the God who knows the end from the beginning designed gender for a purpose and with the incarnation in mind?

Still, it is possible to make too much of his assumption of a male body. As many contemporary observers have noted, the overarching significance of Christ's coming was that he took on human flesh.<sup>13</sup> This is fundamental. Given all that we have seen about God's transcendence, the importance of the gender God chose to assume has to be seen as much less important than the fact that God became human. Nevertheless the incarnate Son of God still presents the Christian Church in the late twentieth century with a scandalous dilemma. The Christian God took upon himself a male body, which in its resurrected form he has and will have forever. He is the human Son of God. At the center of the Christian religion there remains a gender asymmetry that begs for an explanation.

It is this sort of realization that has understandably troubled many feminists and led some of their religious counterparts to search for a different spirituality.<sup>14</sup> Partly in the interests of making Christianity less offensive, some evangelical feminists have sought to minimize the difficulty by suggesting that the real scandal has simply been patriarchal interpretations of Christianity.<sup>15</sup> But I suspect that such moves are insufficient to placate the concerns of secular feminists; the scandal of the incarnation of the Son is too great; the roots of patriarchy seem too deep to those who have no allegiance to the Scriptures. At any rate, the most liberal Christian feminists have concluded that the only honest alternative to an historic Christianity hopelessly shaped by patriarchy is the rejection of doctrines like the Trinity and the incarnation and a reimagining of other images.

Anyone sensitive to the legitimate concerns of feminists can recognize why historic Christianity seems inherently scandalous. But contrary to some Christian feminist assumptions, a scandal to unbelievers is not incontrovert-

<sup>13</sup> Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All* 56; R. S. Anderson, "The Incarnation of God in Feminist Christology: A Theological Critique," *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* (ed. A. F. Kimel, Jr.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 309.

<sup>14</sup> McFague, *Models*; N. Goldenberg, *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions* (Boston: Beacon, 1979); C. P. Christ, "Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Political Reflections," *The Politics of Women's Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power Within the Feminist Movement* (ed. C. Spretnak; Garden City: Doubleday, 1982); S. Cady, M. Ronan and H. Taussig, *Sophia: The Future of Feminist Spirituality* (New York: Harper, 1986).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. e.g. Jewett, *Man*; G. Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles: A Guide for the Study of Female Roles in the Bible* (Grand Rapids; Baker, 1985).

ible evidence of error requiring substantial adjustments to historic Christianity (e.g. a renaming of the Trinity: God the creator, the savior, the sustainer). There are many aspects of the gospel that seem scandalous to us as humans, especially since we are so prone to find fault with God and his revelation. Before too hastily rejecting unpopular elements of God's revelation, it is appropriate for Christians to question themselves as well as alien ideologies. God's salvation (from ourselves, among other things) inclines us to receive submissively God's words and deeds and to resist accommodating them to any unfaithful agenda, whether patriarchy or modernity. Unfortunately we are also prone to twist God's revelation to our own biases, whatever their source. Nevertheless there seem to be but two genuine alternatives to avoiding the issues raised here: submission to God's revelation, or some degree of resistance to that revelation.

The issues at stake are great. How we respond to this scandal has implications for many other issues, including the authority of Scripture and its relevance to us now and into the twenty-first century. The challenge is to find a way that moves through the scandal, beyond feminism and patriarchy, beyond the whole culture-wars dialectic, into union with God. Advocating the avoiding of extremes of course does not originate with me.<sup>16</sup> But rejecting the falsehoods of both traditionalism and feminism while assimilating their strengths is no easy task. It takes time for us as a community to reflect on and critically assess new ideas and agendas with eternal profit. One strategy is to boldly face revelation concerning topics like the gender implications of the incarnation. Perhaps the ongoing communal practice of such strategies (as well as others) will enable us increasingly to overcome the vestiges of traditional thinking that have clung to Christian thought on the subject as well as the influences of feminist modernity, opening up to us a deeper, richer understanding of gender than we have had in the past.

#### IV. THE SECOND-ORDER REALITY OF GENDER IN LIGHT OF THE INCARNATION

We have seen that through the incarnation God manifested himself to the world in male form. Our next task is to explore more deeply some of the implications of God's incarnational revelation to help us better understand the reason for human gender. Before tackling that, however, it is necessary to take a step back and examine the importance of gender in the first place. How important is an individual's gender in the big scheme of things? We are all in the image of God. We all become joint-heirs of the grace of life (1 Pet 3:7), and we are all one in Christ (Gal 3:26). Looking ahead, we will not have marriage in heaven (Luke 20:35). In Christ we stand as complete sons and daughters of God, equally empowered to prophesy (Acts 2:17). Consequently it must be acknowledged that ultimately gender is not very important at all. The primary reality of our human self-understanding is that we are all the image of God. Gender is no more than a second-order reality and of correspondingly less significance.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Storkey, *What's Right*; R. M. Groothuis, *Women Caught in the Conflict: The Culture between Traditionalism and Feminism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

1. *The game of gender: norms for play.* To help bring out the implications of its second-order reality, let us consider gender as a sort of game that we play for now. Games are socially-constructed sets of rules that are observed temporarily for some purpose (usually for amusement) and involve a temporary suspension of a higher set of norms: the norms of everyday life. Gender seems to be a kind of game because (1) we know that males and females are fundamentally equal and (2) gender norms are to a large extent rule-based human constructions with some aspects shaped by culture and some rules/guidelines for gender roles provided in the NT. (It should be added that the game has important connections to biology that will not be addressed here.)

But if we say that gender is a game and we listen to Scripture, it would seem that we are to play it with a certain seriousness. The Scriptures imply that gender is more important than, say, hair color or foot size.<sup>18</sup> In addition it is obvious to all that male and female are the basic subcategories of human nature. For one's membership in the kingdom it is hard to imagine any more important distinguishing human characteristic. Research has found that by one year of age infants can distinguish between other male and female infants.<sup>19</sup> Other research has disclosed what any parent knows: that one's identity is bound up with one's gender, beginning in the earliest years of life.<sup>20</sup> It is as males and females that we exist, and we are called upon to listen to the Word of God as males and females in order to find out who we are individually and in our social relations. From a Christian standpoint, for example, gender-identity disorders like homosexuality, bisexuality and transvestism contravene God's norms for personal and social identity and ought therefore to be resisted (Rom 1:26–27; 1 Cor 6:9). The social or personal construction of gender identity is to occur within certain parameters. Contrary

<sup>17</sup> This also implies that disagreements among Christians about gender roles should not lead to division in the body of Christ. This topic is not central to the Christian faith and must be treated as secondary in the interests of promoting the unity of the Church.

<sup>18</sup> Most evangelicals agree with more liberal Christians that at least some gender norms do not have universal application; cf. T. Schreiner, "Head Coverings, Prophecies and the Trinity: 1 Corinthians 11:2–16," *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (ed. J. Piper and W. Grudem; Wheaton: Crossway, 1992), and Mollenkott, *Women* 80–82, on the female hair-covering norm mandated by Paul in 1 Cor 11:5. Both agree that that norm is not relevant to Christians today. Schreiner, however, believes that the hair-covering norm was a particular norm relevant for the culture Paul was addressing and that the particular cultural gender norm of hair covering flows from an underlying universal mandate that males and females are to conform to the gender norms of whatever culture one lives in (within the moral context of the rest of the universal norms of the NT). Therefore the particular application points to a universal, morally significant principle. We might add that particular applications may differ according to different cultural standards for gender identity (e.g. "skirts" are masculine in Scottish culture). But given passages like 1 Corinthians 11 and 1 Timothy 2, it seems that gender has some universal, prefall, normative implications. Mollenkott, on the other hand, questions Scripture's authority by attributing that gender norm to the limitations within Paul's teachings about gender.

<sup>19</sup> T. G. R. Bower, *The Rational Infant: Learning in Infancy* (New York: Freeman, 1989).

<sup>20</sup> C. N. Jacklin and E. E. Maccoby, "Social Behavior at 33 Months in Same-Sex and Mixed-Sex Dyads," *Child Development* (1978) 557–569; A. C. Huston, "Sex-typing," *Handbook of Child Psychology*, vol. 4 (ed. P. H. Mussen; New York: Wiley, 1983); J. L. Roopnarine, "Sex-typed Socialization in Mixed-Age Preschool Classrooms," *Child Development* (1984) 1078–1084.

to the assertions of some in our culture, we are not free to make up our own rules for the game of gender.

So while gender is not ultimately important it seems to have a certain relative importance for now. On the assumption of our fundamental equality in light of the Word of God, we are called to live out our faith as males and females in marriage and in the Church in a certain relation in order to image and obey God most fully.

2. *The metaphor of gender: God and his bride.* Another way of thinking about gender as a second-order reality is to say that it is no more than a metaphor pointing to another more important reality. Through the incarnation, God—Father and Son—reveals himself as “male.” We humans all, on the other hand, are to respond to him as “female.” Isaiah makes such a point when he records Yahweh as telling the Israelites, “Your husband is your Maker” (Isa 54:5). God used the husband-wife relationship to help the Israelites understand their relationship with him. Paul used this same metaphor in Ephesians but stood it on its head by examining husband-wife relationships in light of the Christ-Church relationship: Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the Church, and wives are to subject themselves to their husbands as unto the Lord. In marriage, gender distinctions provide a living metaphor of the Christian’s submissive relation to Christ (and to the Father). Gender is obviously a central dimension of the human marriage relationship. It is also built into our relationship with God. By loving as Christ and submitting as the Church, married males and females portray in this age the marriage relationship of all time (cf. also Hos 2:19; Ezek 16:3–14; Isa 62:4; Rev 19:7; 2 Cor 11:2; Rom 7:4). Perhaps this is the fundamental reason for gender.

We in the Church have focused most of our attention in ethics on explicit commands, and imperatives are obviously relevant to ethics. But in light of the incarnation (and other passages like Ephesians 5) it appears that there may be at least one normative metaphor. Ethical teaching in such a form is not as clear as verbal commands, but the lack of precision is compensated for in flexibility: broader relevance and breadth of application.

Perhaps Paul’s strict prohibitions (1 Tim 2:9–15; 1 Cor 11:16) regarding women in the Church are additional particular applications of this metaphorical imperative. The principle undergirding the metaphor, however, remains normative for all churches for the duration of this age. Paul’s teaching conveys the abiding moral dimension of the metaphor.

Therefore in both home and church the metaphor should be implemented by following its spirit and not necessarily the letter of its historic application. For example, when Paul says that younger women should be encouraged to be “workers at home” (Titus 2:5) that should not be used against women (especially women without young children) holding jobs outside the home in the technologically-advanced late twentieth century. The gender norm in our culture is for women to work outside the home. If we are to be faithful to the principles of Paul’s teaching regarding conformity to one’s own culture’s gender norms, it is legitimate for women to be employed outside the

home. Again, a woman may need to lead in the home by taking her children to church in spite of her husband's opposition. Or if a church needs spiritual leadership, a gifted female is present, and there are no suitable males (as has sometimes occurred, for example, in mission churches), wisdom would lead us to recognize and make use of such gifts. Biblical principles permit flexibility in application. Consider Christ's observance of the Sabbath (Matt 12:1–8); the OT Sabbath was also a metaphorical imperative (Heb 4:9). How can women ever prophesy in this age, as Acts 2 and 1 Cor 11:5 suggest they will, if opportunities to prophesy are never provided for them? But contrary to the Christian feminist position, such flexibility does not lead necessarily to an ordination norm. That would seem to contravene the universal gender norms implied in 1 Tim 2:11–14; 1 Cor 11:3; 14:34–36. There appeal is made (or assumed) to prefall conditions that would seem to have universal application until the end of the age.

Exactly how we are male and female will inevitably have some cultural and contextual variance. But taking Scripture seriously suggests that until this age ends, men will be seen as the primary family and church leaders. In these spheres the metaphorical norm leads the male to picture Christ and the female to picture the Church. Scripture bids us to go in this direction in our search for gender ideals. The question remains as to what this implies.

3. *Human "authority."* Doubtless this reading of gender is unacceptable to many in our day, for they would argue that this position belittles women and sends them a message that they are inferior. But it must be made clear that such is the case only if those holding this position necessarily believe that being a male leader alters one's ontological equality with women and makes the male truly superior. Surely some have believed such things, but there is no necessary correlation. What feminists have misunderstood (probably because over the centuries Christian men have so poorly understood it themselves) is that the authority invested in male leadership was only "authority." It was only a metaphor, a second-order reality. God is the only genuine authority ultimately.

4. *Christian "authority."* If that were not enough to make male headship unobjectionable, however, a careful examination of the meaning of Biblical leadership reveals that the authority that Christ was calling his disciples to was to be demonstrated through the emptying of oneself and the laying aside of one's power, as Christ loved the Church (Phil 2:1–8; Eph 5:25). Frankly, a radical Christian understanding and practice of headship as self-denial makes all protests against male headship vacuous, for in such cases male leadership becomes—paradoxically—subversive of its own status as earthly authority, for the leader leads in serving. The Christian game/metaphor of gender is dialectically rich.

Strangely, one could say that for very different reasons both modern egalitarians and wife-abusers take gender hierarchy too seriously. Modern

egalitarians argue that any hierarchy undermines belief in equality and implies that females are inferior. As suggested, however, that is not necessarily true. There are plenty of contexts in business, for example, in which persons exist in an authority relationship, and yet no one would seriously assert that the people are fundamentally unequal (unless seduced into believing the lie that having a position of greater authority bestows greater worth). Having human authority only looks superior. But Christians know better. They know that such factors mean nothing to God. Feminists, however, have been seduced into just such a falsehood. They take gender hierarchy too seriously when it is just a game, a metaphor.

On the other hand, with much more tragic results wife-abusers take too seriously gender hierarchy by actually assuming that their “authority” is real—a first-order reality—and that they have the right to treat their wives as less than equal. Such abuse has brought male authority into disrepute by perversely twisting the male’s call to the kind of servant “authority” that works to foster creative initiative in the woman<sup>21</sup> and turning it into an authoritarian prerogative that wounds the soul of the woman and increasingly robs her of her image-bearing potential.<sup>22</sup> Similarly when women have taken male “authority” too seriously by believing in the false superiority of their husbands it has had the effect of undermining their self-esteem and confidence in their own ability to image God fully as women. Both abusers and abused need to understand that gender is just a game, a metaphor.

Sadly, the Church has been slower to fight against such misconceptions than we might have wished. In all fairness this is at least partly because it has been so hard for the Church to separate human tradition from the Word of God. But the time has come for all orthodox believers to resist such authoritarianism, privately and publicly, and work hard at genuine gender reconciliation, though within the context of the metaphorical imperative. Christian husbands themselves can do much to correct such misconceptions (as is being powerfully advocated in groups like Promise Keepers) by practicing the same kind of self-denying leadership that Christ demonstrated in his headship over the Church. If a man is willing to die for his wife, he will be wholeheartedly committed to her well-being and will loathe any tendency to abuse her on any level. Christlike headship prospers others; it never lords it over them.

Paradoxically, feminism has largely confirmed the values of modern western men who find personal significance in autonomous, extrafamily activity and the accumulation of wealth and power. Christ, however, suggested that kingdom significance is found in servanthood, not power: “The greatest among you shall be your servant” (Matt 23:11). In fact when evaluating hierarchical gender roles using kingdom standards it appears that females actually have

<sup>21</sup> Not because women are not capable on their own to act but because all humans benefit from the loving empowering of others who themselves act so as to further the personhood of those they serve.

<sup>22</sup> Again, this robbing can be done to both men and women. All humans are hurt when sinned against.

the privileged role. This is especially ironic since many men and women, including both feminists and traditionalists, have believed that Christianity established men in the most honored positions. Understood from an earthly standpoint, they were. But the values of the kingdom of God involve a reversal of worldly values (1 Cor 1:25). Women who are conforming their lives to the gender norms of the Word of God will be most likely to fulfill the servant norms of the kingdom and least likely to be tempted to find in authority over others their sense of significance. Perhaps the great blessing that feminism has unwittingly provided the Church is that Christian women are now more free than ever to serve in the kingdom from the heart and not simply from empty tradition or male oppression, a freedom that was to some extent undermined when traditional gender roles uncritically reigned. In a post-feminist age women and men in the Church can be more deeply freed to personally, self-consciously receive a NT-based gender identity.

But in light of all that has been said, perhaps one could ask: Why bother going through such motions at all? If gender is a game, why bother playing it? Does not the metaphor at least needlessly promote abuse and the inferiorization of women? Unfortunately such an animus does not give sufficient weight to the fact that the game is a game that God is asking us to play. Though God permits more socialization of this norm than he allows some norms, second-order norms are still established by God. The goal of adhering to the metaphorical imperative still calls out to the Christian community (while allowing for some latitude). The metaphor still lies within the Christian normative framework in this age. That is why the issues are felt to be so important to more conservative Christians. One can just as easily argue that having sexual relations solely with one's husband or wife is unnecessarily rigid. Ultimately Christians avoid extramarital activity because God tells us to. No better reason exists. So it is with submission to the moral principle lying behind the game/metaphor of gender.

#### V. THE TRINITY AND GENDER

Before concluding, one more question should be answered: If in marriage males and females are to relate hierarchically to correspond in metaphor to the Christ-Church relationship, how is it that males and females together fully image God, since only one member of the human pair (the male) is imaging God according to the metaphor? This is possible because gender is multisymbolic and represents more than the relationship of Christ and the Church. It also provides a picture of the Trinity (1 Cor 11:3). According to orthodox trinitarian theology, the Father and Son are fundamentally equal. But at the same time (but not in the same way) the Father is greater than the Son (John 14:28). The Son proceeds from the Father and so is subordinate to him as to his subsistence but not as to his essence. This point has led to a distinction between the Trinity considered ontologically (with regard to their being) and economically (with regard to their work or function).<sup>23</sup>

The human as male and female (understood hierarchically) also provides, then, a striking metaphor for the Trinity. Males and females are ontologically equal but in some ways functionally unequal. As Christ submitted to the Father, so the wife submits to the husband. But both types of submission imply no subordination in essence. Perhaps some Christians who are uncomfortable with the notion of gender hierarchy-within-equality are unaware that such a notion is logically a corollary of the orthodox understanding of the Trinity. Conversely if it is not illegitimate for the Son to be understood as equal to yet subordinate to the Father, surely the case against hierarchy in gender is greatly weakened, at least for the Christian. At any rate this similarity of Trinity and gender provides another reason for the fact that only as male and female can we most fully image the triune God.

#### VI. THE END OF GENDER

Why, then, is there gender? So that in a unique way we might display in a class of relationships the glorious love that exists between God and his people. Christ is the believer's husband, and all believers together constitute the bride of Christ. He is ours, and we are his. He gave his life for us. We are joyfully to receive our God and willingly allow his being to penetrate our own. We are to serve him, working out our salvation, knowing that it is God who is in us causing us to will and do of his good pleasure. God is creating in us new selves. We are all like Mary. We are all pregnant. But we are not bearing a male child. The new self in us all is "female," God's bride. In the next age the game will be over, the metaphor exhausted. There will be no more human marriages. Maybe that is because when the perfect comes (the first-order), the imperfect (the second-order) will be done away with. Spiritually speaking, when resurrected we shall together all be as "female."<sup>24</sup> In that day, any advantages of women or men will disappear as we will all be fulfilled through perfect union with our husband. In the meantime, let us play and live as unto the Lord.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939); O. Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981).

<sup>24</sup> This need not imply that our resurrected bodies will be gender-neutral. Though there is little relevant Scriptural material, we would seem warranted in concluding that our resurrected physical forms will have continuity with our preresurrection bodies. For a discussion on this see J. M. Frame in *Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (ed. Piper and Grudem).