

ONE OF THE BOYS?

What Is the Gender of God?

Text: Deuteronomy 4:9-20

I

The topics that we are exploring in this series are of the kind that raise all kinds of strong feelings and opinions. For that reason, I hope you will hang in there with me. Don't make up your mind too swiftly about what is said. Please don't walk out. Stay till the end, because what I'm going to say at the start may seem disturbing to some.

In his book, *The Home, Courtship, Marriage, and Children*, John R. Rice states his viewpoint on one of the most controversial theological topics of our time. Here's what Rice says: "A man is a somebody! For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church, and the savior of [it.] God's inspired Word tells us that the man is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man. A man is like God in a sense that a woman is not. [For] God is masculine.

"For example," writes Rice: "God is always in the Bible called He, never she. He is called Father, never mother. Christ is called the man, not the woman. He is called Bridegroom, not bride, King not queen, Prophet not prophetess, Son not daughter. Christ was a man, a masculine man. His body was a man's body. His work was a man's work. His temptations a man's temptations. God would not have had the Bible so full of [these realities] if He did not want us to notice that Christ was a man, not a woman, and that man is therefore made in the image of God in a sense that cannot be true of woman."¹ How does that statement sit with you?

I confess that it is a bit troubling to me, but before I weigh in on the subject, it seems important to set forth one basic premise for this whole discussion: If there is a God (as I believe there is) then he is, by definition, free to set up the order of the universe in any way he chooses. He doesn't have to agree with me or consult with me. He doesn't have to be politically correct. He doesn't have to make things comfortable for me or anyone else. God is free to be *God*.

Having laid that foundation then, what do we make of the statement that John Rice makes? Would you agree with him that, when it come right down to it, God is *one of the boys* – that, if you happen to be male, then you have an inside track spiritually-speaking; that you are by default closer to the image of God than your female counterparts? Or, if you happen to be female, would you agree that you are by divine design destined to play a secondary, inferior role?

The worldview held by John Rice is an incredibly influential one, not simply in the Christian world, and not only during the 1940's when Rice wrote those words. Around

the planet and through the centuries, divine sanction has often been cited as justification for the elevation of men over women in the home, the workplace, and the church. This has not, however, been without tremendous cost. Countless women have quietly agonized over being denied the dignity, opportunity, or physical safety that as children they naively assumed were rights. Countless others grew up in a world where they thought the playing field was even till experience with the marketplace, divorce or bereavement showed them how out of balance things really are. Some women here today have been physically or emotionally abused and have been afraid to admit it.

Every now and then, some woman is courageous enough to talk about what all this feels like. Occasionally, I have been invited onto the holy ground of such a confession, and the pain I encounter is so great that I frankly want to run from it. I'd prefer to deny or bury it. I am tempted to retreat to my own gender-bunker, so that I will not have to face it. Does every man inflict this sort of pain? Of course not. Does every woman feel a sense of oppression at the hands of a patriarchal society or abusive men? I think not. But what makes the giving and the receiving of the pain that IS there so particularly awful is how often it is seen as the natural outcome of a Universe in which, as author Mary Daly puts it: "Since God is male, the male is God."

II

Again, if God is male and he wants to set things up to give men a higher status, then he is free to do this. But is this the natural order of things as the Bible describes it? Is it true -- as John Rice maintains, for example -- that the male of the species is alone made in the image of God? Now, I grant you that when you read a certain portion of Genesis in isolation from the rest, you could come to that conclusion. Genesis 2:21-23 plainly says that God made man first, and then only later made woman out of the rib of man, "**flesh of [his] flesh.**" Some observers infer that this order of Creation implies a greater status for man. The Apostle Paul wondered about this himself.

Knowing that I was speaking on the subject of *Men, Women, and Power*, a friend sent me a note recently that challenges this logic. Just remember that "Ginger Rogers did everything that Fred Astair did, except that she did it backwards and in high heels." In other words, "following" someone may actually be an evidence of superior capacity, not a lesser one. It does seem spurious to infer superiority on the basis of the order of Creation. If that were true, then plants and fish are of superior status than either men or women are because, in the order of Creation, they came first.

But is human primacy really the point the Bible is trying to make. It seems difficult to even get to Genesis chapter 2 without first reading Genesis chapter 1 verse 27, and this verse tends to put this whole discussion in proper focus. I quote: "**So God created man in his image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.**" Did you get that? When the Bible defines the word "man" it does so

in terms of the phrase “male and female.” The message of Scripture is that when God sought to create humanity in his own image, he created male and female, equally.

Now it seems to me that this clear biblical assertion does more than tell us about the nature of humanity. It also helps to answer the second question, the one about the nature of God: Is God himself really male? You see, it has been said that humanity has God’s fingerprints all over it. But how can Someone leave prints without first having the indentations on his own fingers? How could both male and female be **“in the image of God”** unless there was *something* of male and female in God for God to press into the clay of their humanity?

Let me be clear, I don’t mean that God is literally, sexually, male and female. As Dr. Elizabeth Achtemeier puts it: “The God of the Bible always transcends all sexuality [for] sexuality is a structure of creation, and the Creator is totally other than all that [has been] made. But the point is that *something* of what we associate with maleness and with femaleness is present in God. This is why the Bible is as jam-packed with references to the nurturing, merciful, forbearing qualities of God as it is with references to the stereotypical qualities associated with maleness. It’s not that *God* is either male or female; it’s just that God has given to women some of the contours of his character and to men some of the others.

In fact, the whole debate about the so-called masculinity of God might well stop there, but for the next question anybody who’s still awake will be quick to ask: “If God isn’t male, then why does the Bible repeatedly call God ‘Him’ and ‘Father’ and ‘King,’ and all those other masculine titles?” That’s a great question. To get at an answer, however, requires understanding a bit better the particular context into which God’s self-revelation came and the faith of the Israelites and of the Early Church arose.

You will remember from your Old Testament studies that the Hebrew people who wrote down the Scriptures were surrounded by a variety of other religions which were an affront to God. The common characteristic of these religions were that they worshipped fertility -- and fertility goddesses in particular. Such cults engaged in liturgies that celebrated the suckling breast, the menstrual cycle, genitalia, and even sacred prostitution.

“Well,” you say, “I can understand why liturgical prostitution might be a problem to God, but if God was annoyed by all that other stuff, isn’t that suggestive that God *is* just one of the boys – and a bit misogynistic at that? I mean, is there really anything wrong with female sexuality?” Certainly not; female sexuality, like male sexuality, is one of the greatest gifts of God. In many pagan religions, however, the human reproductive capacity -- and that of women in particular (since their sexual functions are so bound up with bringing forth life in an almost godlike way) came to be viewed as something worthy not only of respect or admiration – which they are -- but of actual worship in and of itself.

From worship of the power of reproduction it was only a short hop to the out-and-out worship of humanity itself as divine. People began to say: "If we have the ultimate power ourselves -- the power to reproduce -- then we too must be divine." The insidious sin of the goddess religions of Baal the Israelites faced or the goddess religions of Diana that the Early Church faced was the same sin that God condemned in the Garden -- the belief touted by the tempter in Genesis 3:5, **"You shall be as God."**

Do you see a bit better now why it would be unthinkable to God's people in either Old or New Testament times that the one true transcendent God should be revealed as "Her" or "Mother" or "Queen"? It's not that God does not have any of what we call "female" qualities. In Isaiah 66:13, God says: **"As one whom his mother comforts, so will I comfort you."** In Matthew 23:37, Jesus says of Jerusalem: **"How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings."** But to call God by a female title or pronoun was to risk sliding toward the dangerous heresies and paganism that the people of Israel or the Church saw all around them. It was not safe.

III

We are always in danger of slipping back into ancient and dangerous heresies. In the denomination in which I was raised, and a number of others today, there's been a movement in recent decades to "re-imagine" God in a heavily sexualized manner. Some of this movement's proponents have elevated human sexual function to the level of sacrament. They've spoken of human beings as divine and even hinted in the direction of goddess worship. But to abide this is to plunge back into that ancient and cruel deception out of which the people of God have been called. Our hope and strength is in the one God, whose being ever transcends us, but whose benevolence comes to meet us, using our categories and forms but never bound by them. God is like a holy fire who may alight in this way or in that place but will not be boxed.

As you go out, remember the words of Moses from our text for today: **"You saw no form of any kind the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire. Therefore watch yourselves very carefully, so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman."** Remember that idols can be mental models every bit as much as they can be models made of wood or stone. Remember that the God who waits to meet you out there has his fingerprints on everyone you encounter, but God is so much more than any gender or person you have ever met. Even when Christ reveals God to us as the Heavenly Father, or as the woman who goes in search of the lost coin, or in terms of so many other powerful, meaningful images – these figures of speech are like pieces of stained glass. They are simply fragile windows through which we see, still somewhat darkly, certainly incompletely, the glory of who God truly IS – until that final

Day when, as St. Paul observes, we will know God even as we are now – male and female – **“fully known”** (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Let us pray...

O God, we give you thanks that you have revealed something of your ineffable glory to we who bow in worship before you today. Guard us from the idolatry and sentimentality to which we are ever prone. We name you as Father, because Jesus taught us that you love us and watch over us like a perfect dad. We celebrate that tender and searching love by which you, God, still gather to yourself your children and offer them comfort. But we know that these terms are not so much containers of your Being but catalysts for ours. Help us to love and care for our families and one another with your kind of faithfulness. Grant to we who have been made in your image, the capacity to recognize and honor that image in all the men and women we meet today. For we pray in your holy name. Amen.

Reflection Questions

1. What was hardest about this sermon to accept/understand? What was most helpful?
2. To what extent do you view God as fundamentally a “male” being? How do you explain/understand “female”ness then?
3. What are some of the “idolatrous” images that people make of God? What are some of the idolatrous images of God that YOU are prone to worship, if you’re not careful?
4. What other thoughts, feelings, or questions does this message kick up for you?

¹John R. Rice, *The Home, Courtship, Marriage, and Children* (Wheaton: Sword of the Lord, 1945), pp. 86-87.