

An Accident of the Incarnation

Article by

Richard A. Rhem
Minister of Preaching and Theological Inquiry
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan

Published in
Perspectives

A Journal of Reformed Thought
February 1987, pp. 4-6

The maleness of the human person in whom God was incarnate was an accident of the incarnation. That is the thesis of this essay, which contends that in another epoch of human history, in another cultural context, the incarnation of the Word might have found expression in feminine form. *Accident* is used here in its technical meaning in philosophical discourse, in logic, as “something contingent, not necessary, non-essential, or that might not have been,” not in its more popular meaning of “anything that happens, an event, especially an unforeseen contingency, a disaster - something to do with chance or fortune. Accident as used here means specifically “a non-essential accompaniment.”

Thus the contention is not that the maleness of the incarnation of the Word in its concrete historical manifestation in Jesus of Nazareth was a matter contingent, a chance occurrence apart from the predetermined will of God; on the contrary, given the time in which God took time for us, maleness was the historical garb chosen to accomplish the purpose of revelation. However, the gender of the incarnation was determined by the historical context of its manifestation; it was not determined by its purpose, namely, the revelation of God in human form.

The same contention can be made from the opposite side using another technical philosophical term: the essence of the incarnation was the revelation of God in human form. The essential matter which came to expression was the humanity of the Word. To accomplish the essence of God's purpose, to be revealed in human form, it was necessary to select a gender, male or female. But the selection of gender was determined by the time of the incarnation, not the essential purpose of the incarnation.

The *essence* of the incarnation was God in human form;
the *accident* of the incarnation was God in a human form of male gender.

Given the patriarchal society of the world into which Jesus came, the purpose of the incarnation was best accomplished by the utilization of a human person of male gender. But the essential element of Jesus in whose face we have been shown “the light of revelation - the revelation of the glory of God ...” was his humanity, not his male gender.

In *The Preparation of the World for Christ*, a history of the world into which Jesus was born, David R. Breed describes the historical circumstances which prevailed at the time of Jesus’ birth and points to the providential preparation of the large tapestry of history which made the time of incarnation “the fullness of time” - a time in which the revelation of God in human form took root and flourished and gained the ascendancy over the great power of imperial Rome. It was one world united under the *pax Romana*, pervaded by Hellenistic culture, drawn together by the Greek language; a world empty of soul, hungering for a true word. Breed makes an interesting case for the preparation of the moment chosen for the supreme revelation of God in our time and space. It was indeed a *Kairos* time, a most opportune moment for God manifest in the flesh.

However, recognizing a providential purpose operative in the course of human history preparing the world for the incarnation of the Word must not be extended to include the patriarchal character of Jewish society at that moment as essential to God’s purpose to reveal himself in human form. If that were the case, then the argument being made here would fall; then, indeed, not simply revelation in our humanity, but revelation in humanity of male gender would be essential and the superiority of male gender as reflective of God would be established. It is that that I am denying by asserting that the maleness of the incarnation of the Word was an accident, not an essential mark of the incarnation. Otherwise, we would be saying something about God which would distort the biblical image.

Were male gender the essence of the incarnation, maleness would necessarily be ascribed to God. But such ascription would run contrary to the biblical understanding of God in spite of the fact that God is referred to as Father. Such reference is found in the Old Testament as well as in Jesus’ usage. It is also found in other religions of the ancient world. But the use of Father in reference of God is not a statement about gender.

In the later of the two Creation accounts (Genesis 1:1-2:4), we read,

*So God created man in his own image;
in the image of God he created him;
male, and female, he created them. (11:27)*

Without getting into the complexities of the biblical idea of the image of God, it is obvious that in whatever that image consists, it embraces both maleness and femaleness. Maleness and femaleness reflect something of

God who must incorporate both within the Divine Being. Thus, God transcends our human sexual differentiation.

It is interesting to note that even our human sexual differentiation is not an absolute differentiation; maleness and femaleness are the opposite poles of the human sexual spectrum. The individual finds a place not at one pole or the other, but somewhere on the continuum that connects the poles. In this, the human person would appear to be a reflection of the image of God who incorporates both male and female qualities and transcends sexual differentiation.

Why, then, is God called Father in the Bible? As indicated above, the concreteness of the incarnation demanded a particular time, place, people, gender and person; the “scandal of particularity” comes to expression in our claim that the infinite and eternal God is revealed in the face of Jesus of Nazareth, born in Bethlehem during the reign of Caesar Augustus. An aspect of that concreteness was the patriarchal society and thus the use of Father. The “Father” image is so deeply ingrained that one wonders if it could ever be replaced by another image. It has been called in question, however.

Hans Küng has raised the question about the appropriateness of the name Father. He asserts that such usage is problematic in the age of women’s emancipation. He asks,

Should we without more ado apply to God a name implying sexual differentiation? Is God a man, masculine, virile? Are we not making God in the image of man, to be more exact of a male human being? (*On Being a Christian*, p. 310)

He points out that the designation of God as Father is not determined solely by Yahweh’s uniqueness, but

appears to be also sociologically conditioned, bearing the imprint of the male-oriented society. (*Ibid.*)

But in the Old Testament, God is not “forthrightly male,” but has also feminine, maternal features. Today, however, we must be clear about this. He contends,

The designation “Father” will be misunderstood unless it is regarded, not in contrast to “Mother,” but symbolically (analogously): “Father” as patriarchal symbol - also with matriarchal features - of a transhuman, transsexual ultimate reality. Today less than ever may the one God be seen merely within a masculine-paternal framework, as an all-too-masculine theology used to present him. The feminine-maternal element in him must

also be recognized. To address God as Father can then no longer be used as the religious justification of a social paternalism at the expense of woman or in particular for the permanent suppression of the feminine element in the Church (or ministry). (*Ibid.*)

The God revealed in the human form of Jesus is a God of redeeming love, not a God who is in fact

the projection of instilled fears, of human domination, lust for power, arrogance and vindictiveness. This Father-God is not a theocratic God who might serve as an excuse - if only indirectly - for the representatives of totalitarian systems, whether pious-ecclesiastical, or impious-atheistic, who attempt to take his place and exercise his sovereign rights. These men become holy or unholy gods of orthodox teaching and absolute discipline, of law and order, of dictatorship and planning, regardless of the claims of other human beings. (p. 312)

Is there an image for God that might better reflect the divine-human relationship, avoiding the possible misunderstanding and exploitation of the father image? Alternating the pronouns referring to God, she and he, is being done by some; also the use of “father-mother” finds occasional expression. Our biblical understanding of God certainly justifies such usage even though it may not find easy acceptance. “Parent” is a possibility, although not carrying the emotional weight of father or mother.

Anne E. Carr of the Divinity School in Chicago suggests that some would move away from the parental images

... which can inculcate a relation of childish rather than adult religious dependence. That is to say, while parental images express compassion, acceptance, guidance, and discipline, they do not express the mutuality, maturity, cooperation, responsibility, and reciprocity demanded by personal and political experience today.

Carr refers to Sallie McFague who shows how the father image

has expanded into patriarchalism as a “metaphysical worldview,” a “mindset” that becomes a “whole way of ordering reality.”

McFague argues that this dominant father image must be countered with many images; no one image will suffice. She points out that we image God according to that which is most important to us humanly and suggests “friend” as perhaps the most appropriate image. Carr affirms this image, claiming that

The metaphor of God as friend corresponds to the feminist ideal of “communal personhood,” a relationship among persons, groups, and lifestyles that is non-competitive, mutually enhancing, and desperately needed in our world.

Jurgen Moltmann supports the appropriateness of the friend image. He writes,

The friend of God does not live any longer “under God” but with and in God.

One finds this demonstrated in the life and death of Jesus who reveals a God who suffers for us and invites us into a fellowship of suffering for others.

I have argued that the maleness of the Word of God was the accident of the incarnation, its essence being the revelation of God in human form. This is confirmed by Karl Barth who prefaces paragraph 15 of *Church Dogmatics* I, 2, “The Mystery of Revelation” this way:

The mystery of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ consists in the fact that the eternal Word of God chose, sanctified and assumed human nature and existence into oneness with Himself ... (p. 122)

In section 3, the splendid discussion of the virgin birth entitled “The Miracle of Christmas,” Barth speaks of the human involvement in the birth of the Word being

... only in the form of non-willing, non-achieving, non-creative, non-sovereign man, only in the form of man who can merely receive, merely be ready, merely let something be done to and with himself. (p. 191)

He is in no way denying that the woman has her share in the determination of man.

Only a foolish ideology of manhood or an equally foolish ideology of womanhood can deny her her share in this determination of man. (p. 193)

But Barth argues there can be no talk of an equality of the two sexes in this respect.

God alone knows whether the history of humanity, nations and states, art, science, economics, has in fact been and is so predominantly the history of males, the story of all the deeds and works of males, as it appears to be, or whether, for all that, the

hidden factor of female co-operation and participation has not, in fact, always turned the scale in a way of which chronicles, acts and monuments give us no information, because it involves an element which is deeply concealed both psychologically and sociologically, although it was not and did not need to be less potent for that reason. Be that as it may, if there had been a matriarchate instead of a patriarchate ... nevertheless it is - well, "significant," that the historical consciousness of all nations, states and civilizations begins with the patriarchate. Male action is significant for the world history and characteristic of the world history with which we are acquainted, as it has been and actually is for us, even if it is not so in itself. (p. 193)

Therefore, Barth contends it is precisely the male participation that had to be set aside. What takes place in the mystery of Christmas is not world history and it is not the work of human genius.

His eternal generation of this eternal Son excludes a human generation, because a human father and human generation, the whole action of man the male, can have no meaning here. Therefore it is the very absence of masculine action that is significant here. (p. 194)

Of interest in this discussion is not Barth's argument for the virgin birth as a sign of the one who was fully in our history but did not arise from our history; rather, it is his contention that the virgin birth signified the setting aside of precisely the male domination of which history is full. The sign is a judgment on the willing, achieving, creative, sovereign action of the male.

If one grants Barth's contention that the sign of the virgin is a judgment on male domination, then it would confirm the argument pursued above that maleness was not essential to but accidental to the incarnation of the Word. To read back into the God of revelation sexual differentiation, specifically maleness, is to distort the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. And on the basis of such a distortion, to justify male domination of the Church and its ministry is totally without warrant.

Carr cites the ethicist Daniel Maguire, who argues,

Sexism is the elementary human sin. If the essential human molecule is dyadic, male/female, the perversion of one part of the dyad perverts the other. And, to distort femininity and masculinity, the constitutive ingredients of humanity, is to distort humanity itself.

Maguire welcomes feminine participation in theological discussion which will bring a new wholeness to the public conversation in the Church. The

incorporation of affect, mysticism and concrete experience into theological and ethical discussion and the denial of the almighty, macho-masculine God whose exclusionary symbolism is utterly arbitrary will move us toward wholeness without distortion.