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Christology and Feminism

DAVID P. SCAER



THE CHURCH ALREADY HAS A CHRISTOLOGY perpetuated in her liturgy, preached in her sermons, and preserved in her theology. Without Christology the church would not be the church. Christology is ultimately an in-house enterprise. What really matters is not what others say about Jesus, but how he understood himself and how he was defined in the apostolic proclamation.

Theology has the task of perpetuating that picture of Christ revealed in the Bible so that it may be proclaimed in the church. Who he was and what he did have been adjusted in every age to match the prevailing attitudes and philosophies of the time. Several years ago Jaroslav Pelikan prepared a book showing how artists depict Jesus. Artists do with pictures what theologians attempt to do with words. The church's history may inform our Christology, but should it be the final determining factor in shaping and informing it?

History shapes the picture of Jesus for both the scholar and the less-informed laity. We do not know what the last few years' events in the former Soviet Union will mean for the church and theology. They seem to indicate a reverse of philosophical and religious thinking since the age of reason. Since the age of the enlightenment there has been a steady and relentless march toward a culture without religion and specifically without Christianity. The high points in this evolution were the French and Bolshevik revolutions, which were economic and political expressions of humanism. Whether Christianity will emerge as the dominant force is still to be proven, but the humanistic philosophy that opposed Christianity has proven to be bankrupt.

It has been said that we are living in the post-Christian era. But we may now be on the verge of the post-secular age. For all the secularism of western culture in the last two centuries, this secularism could not blot out the figure of Christ. He seems indelibly imprinted on the collective consciousness. As a result, rather than ignore Christ, religious and philosophical movements reinterpret him. It is easier to make him fit the prevailing thought than to dispose of him. Perhaps the motivation was a good one, namely, to readjust the image of Christ to make him a more believable figure. Even the nineteenth-century Christologies, with all their reductionism in their quest for the

historical Jesus, were attempts to salvage as much of Christ as possible in the face of radical historical agnosticism.

There are many christological options current in critical thought, but I will focus on how Christology relates to the doctrine of the ministry and how both Christology and ministry have been affected by and adjusted to feminist thought.

In theology, feminist thought necessarily involves the ordination of women. It requires participation of women in decision-making roles in the church. It retools the liturgy to remove any form of sexism by using a different language to minimize or eliminate any masculine references to God. It requires a softening of the hardened, masculine, patriarchal God with feminine characteristics.

Politically, feminism expresses itself in unlimited right to abortion, marriage between people of the same gender, and providing government-supported child care for working mothers. The political agenda of feminists need not detain us here, except that political goals have become part of the church agenda in some cases.

All of this could lead to a desire to isolate ourselves from the feminist theological and political ideologues. As attractive as theological isolation from other philosophies, political programs, and aberrant theologies is, isolation is impossible. We only have to look to the ELCA, which is experiencing all of these phenomena to one degree or another. We are only deceiving ourselves if we believe that the LCMS has not been affected by feminist thought.

We should examine what changes we make in deference to feminist sensitivities. What might be unextraordinary adjustments in our practice take on a greater symbolical meaning simply because of the situation. It is the nature of adiaphora that they are not always adiaphora. Thus we might agree that nonsexist language is appropriate to express the biblical distinction between human beings in general and males in particular. Thus humankind might express the unity of our race in a way that mankind does not. But we should not deceive ourselves into believing that we are motivated by scholarly precision, when in fact we are accommodating our practices to prevailing egalitarian and feminist thought. Linguistically, we might find to our surprise that substituting humankind for mankind is an unnecessary affront to our language. Our deception is even more profound if we acquiesce on any point of church practice and liturgy without being aware that we may be leaving the bounds of a biblical theology for a contemporary philosophical movement. The prevalent Christology with

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regard to the current discussions within the LCMS gives sufficient evidence of this theological departure.

At this moment the LCMS is discussing the participation of women in the public liturgical functions, as well as some suggested changes in the liturgy and hymns. In so doing we must make sure that we are not blind in claiming that these matters are adiaphora. We Lutherans may have played the adiaphoristic card too often as a convenient way of absolving ourselves from the requirements of difficult questions. The things we may call adiaphora have christological consequences.

Feminist theology recognizes the profound influence of symbols and makes it their first order of business that the right symbols are in place to convey the right message.

What we do reflects what we believe. We fail to see how our practices and doctrines are intimately related to each other. But I assure you that the rest of the theological world does not suffer from this failure. Feminist theology recognizes the profound influence of symbols and makes it their first order of business that the right symbols are in place to convey the right message. They remove what they consider aberrant symbols. For theological feminism an all-male clergy is as symbolically offensive as is the crucified male figure of Jesus. The person of the pastor speaks volumes about our image of God. When a woman claims to be the pastor, the volumes are opened to what feminists think about God.

Within our tradition, the necessary relationship between the person of the pastor and the person of Christ within the liturgical framework may not be exceptionally pronounced and developed, but this relationship is evident for the worshipping congregation and not lost upon feminist theology. Putting women pastors in place makes it easier to offer a concept of God that is acceptable to feminist theology. When it is viewed from the inside, it becomes obvious that feminist theologians see their movement and the future they see for it within Christianity. Some find Christianity, even with major adjustments, unredeemable. Two feminist theologians who are incidentally women, Jacquelyn Grant and Daphne Hampson, evidence this feminist vision in their work.

Jacquelyn Grant, a professor at the Gammon Theological Seminary of the Interdenominational Theological Center, presumably in Atlanta, Georgia, is the author of *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus* with the subtitle *Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*.¹ Though the title seems to step outside the bounds of normal theology, her book cannot be dismissed. It was published by the America Academy of Religion, a group that acclaims its own scholarly prestige. Former LCMS clergymen Martin Marty and Robert Wilkens have recently headed the group. Grant attempts to construct a Christology that is

bound neither by what she considers the white racist Christology of Europe and North America or by a male-dominated expression of it. She wants to offer a Christology that is both black and feminist, with racism as a greater heresy than is the sexism of male domination. In general terms she is a liberation theologian desiring to free the church from the evils of racism and sexism. With her stress on black theology, she even distances herself from white women's feminism, which has not gone far enough. She depicts Christ coming to the aid of poor black women through the experiences of oppressed black women in America. She advocates reading the Bible in the light of their experience, accepting those sections favoring liberation and rejecting those that speak of subjection.²

Here is a method of interpretation that we find strange, but it is typical of feminist theology in general. It involves an adjustment of liturgical practices and of our perception of Jesus. This method unashamedly reads the Scriptures selectively. Even if we want to avoid the oversimplification that there has been nothing new in theology since Schleiermacher, we can still say that Schleiermacher is as contemporary as he was two centuries ago. (What Francis Pieper said about Schleiermacher in his *Christian Dogmatics* may be long forgotten, but his analysis and critique of experience theology are as relevant as they were in his day.)

For Grant, as for Schleiermacher, Christology is not derived or critiqued by a normative Scripture or tradition, but by how it calibrates and corresponds to her feelings. As a black woman, she finds the current feminist theology to be inadequate and in need of being supplemented by her experience as a black. As with Schleiermacher, her theology is an attempt to formulate in a systematic way her feelings that provide the basis and boundaries for what we call religion. There is no place for supernatural intervention. Religion can be explained totally by the human experience. Even Christ is not sacrosanct or immune from adjustment.

Daphne Hampson operates from the same starting point, but she makes no attempt to salvage anything from Christianity, including Christ. Christianity is an historical religion with patriarchal origins. It is incapable of redemption through reformulation. Religious thought is the articulation of personal experiences or of the combined experiences of the community. Until recent times, that community was dominated by white European males.

Before we briefly survey Grant's analysis of feminist theology, reference should be made to the approach taken by one vocal proponent for feminist causes in LCMS circles—we do have feminists—who for our purposes will remain anonymous here. The constant theme in her public speeches is her determination to find her relationship as a woman to God and then to discover what God intends for her to do in the church. Though it may sound innocent enough, this approach is neither right nor safe. The searcher seeking for the proper relationship to God craves peace, but is forever deprived of peace, since a relationship is sought outside of God's revelation in Christ. It is not right, because it makes human need, rather than the supernatural intervention or revelation of God, the starting point of theology. Such theology constantly changes because no single experience can be normative for the experience of others. It is dangerous because it makes the human being the final factor in

determining the form of theology. A feminist theology also threatens the traditional biblical anthropology.

When one gender is divorced from the other in its understanding of its relationship to God, we are no longer dealing with a biblical anthropology. The male and female as a one-flesh concept becomes inoperative. Feminist theology is intent on understanding male and female in isolation from each other. Any thought that the female is contained in the male is rejected out of hand.³

Feminist theology, like any theology that is derived from religious experience, will only incidentally and accidentally and not necessarily be Christian. Feminist Christianity places the stress on feminism rather than on Christianity. This is not to deny that it retains certain Christian concepts in their coarsest terms. Yet critiques of feminist theology in its mild or most extreme forms will need go little further than the critique of Schleiermacher. The idea that theology emerges from a religious community as the place where individual feelings come to expression is as essential for feminism as it was for Schleiermacher. Just how does feminist theology proceed from that point?

Grant dispels any ideas that all feminists are cut from the same cloth and that they are all saying the same things and desiring the same goals. The movement is complex. Some want to express their feminist ideals in Christian terms, while others find such a task hopeless. For Grant, in speaking of feminist theologians and theologies, we are not speaking of women who do theology. Rather, we are speaking of both men and women who believe that understanding the place of woman, as woman, is a factor in understanding God, in comprehending his revelation to us, and in formulating theology. Grant provides a useful service in dividing feminists into three categories.

The idea that theology emerges from a religious community as the place where individual feelings come to expression is as essential for feminism as it was for Schleiermacher.

For biblical feminists, the first category of feminists, the Bible is authoritative, but they read it in the light of their own experience. They make the Bible agree with their own views, all the time claiming that they are following the Bible. This approach urges equality in the ministry based on Galatians 3. That there is in Christ no male or female is exemplary of this first kind of feminist theology that wants to be understood as Christian.

The second group consists of liberation feminists who try to remain within biblical dimensions, but with significant adjustments to their Christology. The "Christ-ness" of Jesus is emphasized at the expense of his maleness. Christ can be conceived of as sister. In this philosophical Nestorianism, the figure of the male Jesus is ignored in favor of the more neutral Christ

figure. In other cases Jesus is no longer understood in terms of leadership, power, and domination. He identifies with the downtrodden to give power to the powerless. Still another form of liberation feminism associates Jesus with those oppressed not only by sexism, but racism, classism and anti-Semitism.⁴ The approach makes one part of the biblical revelation criticize another part. Grant generally takes this approach.

Grant's third classification is the Rejection feminists for whom the "women's experience and not the Bible is solely authoritative. Because the Bible has been used primarily against women, it is used by negative source by rejectionists."⁵ The Bible is a valuable source of negative examples because of what it says about God, Jesus, and the relationship between men and women.

Feminist theology has already become engrained in American theological education, and it would be naive to think that we have remained or will remain unaffected by it.

One year after Grant's study, Daphne Hampson's *Theology and Feminism* was published. Hampson could be classified in the group identified by Grant as rejectionist. Hampson goes one step further in not only rejecting the Bible, but renouncing Christianity. She belongs to the far left of the rejectionist group, not even bothering to use the Bible in providing negative examples. The Bible is simply ignored. The value of Hampson's study is that it shows how logically feminism and Christianity are incompatible. (Thus her emergence from Christian feminist circles must be an embarrassment to them.) Looking for the foundational principle of sexual equality is absurd, simply because the Bible teaches no such thing. The readjustment of the Christ figure to fit feminist thought is simply rejected by her out of hand. She does credit Christianity for alerting her to ideas about goodness that has moved her to reject Christianity. Feminism is seen as the overarching reality corresponding to her views that God is to be found in nature. The historical particularism of Christianity and Jesus must be rejected.

Thus we come to the point where a nature religion finds the historical religion of incarnation objectionable. We are on the verge of paganism. In the opinion of Daphne Hampson, as long as Christianity understands itself as a historical religion, it can never be completely free from being a male-biased or male-dominated religion, because its history is patriarchal.⁶ "The figure of Christ," she writes, "is that of a male figure, and that is not to be evaded. God is conveyed through the use of metaphors which are male not female."⁷

A milder form of theological feminism attempts to do what Hampson rejects, that is, to express God in feminine metaphors. Her rejection of Christianity certainly places Hampson among the most radical theologians, but she is perhaps more honest than those who have only kept Christianity by adjusting it to fit their views. She refuses to replace male metaphors with female ones and to call God mother and not Father. For her, an adjusted Christianity is no Christianity.

Something similar happened in the nineteenth century. At one end of the spectrum was the radical David Frederick Strauss, who in his *Das Leben Jesus* dismissed all the Gospels as myth. At the other end was Hengenstenberg, who accepted all of them as historically true. Both men recognized that the biblical texts and the Christian religion, especially what it said

about Jesus, had to be taken as one cloth and could not be adjusted to fit the prevailing philosophical needs.

By refusing any accommodation with Christianity, Hampson is playing the role of Frederick David Strauss. The maleness of Jesus is just as offensive as the prohibition of women from the ministry. Either gives a sufficient cause for renouncing Christianity, which in fact she has done.⁸ Hampson correctly points out that Christians who support the ordination of women are faced with the question of what the maleness of Jesus signifies. For Daphne Hampson the practice of ordaining women pastors and the maleness of Jesus were insurmountable barriers. In order to be true to her feminist ideals, she renounced Christianity, because the maleness of Jesus was in itself an obstacle to her continuing as an ordained minister in the Episcopal Church of Scotland.

No church can have a feminized clergy and still insist on a masculine Christ.

Feminism must address the connection between the maleness of Jesus and the apostles by adjusting or ignoring Jesus. This is rarely if ever used in our arguments for an all-male clergy and for the prohibition of women's ordination. This refusal or inability to bring Christ's maleness into the question of who may serve in the ministry may indicate that our concept of the incarnation is incomplete and that we find it difficult to see that ministry exists primarily in Christ and only secondarily in us. No longer is it an issue of apostolic succession but of christological succession. The historical dimension of the ministry becomes so unimportant as not to play a part in our theology.

Now back to Hampson's critique. The historical Christian religion emerging from the Bible is so male-ridden that Hampson has taken the only alternative open to her: reject it entirely. She admits that the conservative approach that rejects feminism in all of its points, including the ordination of women, is unanswerable.⁹ For her it is all or nothing. It is again the battle between the biblically conservative Hengstenberg and the radically agnostic David Frederick Strauss. Conservatives have taken the all and she the nothing. We might want to take note that Daphne Hampson has taken as her conservative whipping-boy Karl Barth, who finds the ordination of women to be biblically offensive.

Hampson's position is not beyond criticism. She assumes the basic tenet of feminism that both genders are on the same level. To support her position she incessantly cites Darwin that the human descent from ape-like creatures has effectively destroyed the biblical belief that the male was created before the female. Thus she finds that the very foundation for male dominance has been destroyed. Whether Darwin or anyone else has conclusively proven that the male was not the first creature,

whether that was an amoeba or a human being, is beyond my ken. It is hard for me to believe that the male and female emerged simultaneously, regardless of what level of evolution took place. This requires from me a faith that I am incapable of having.

Hampson is simply opposed to any male-dominated religion. She will go to any lengths to prove her points. Basic beliefs, especially those derived from experience, are excused from demonstration. She assumes, for example, that in the Bible men are painted in a more favorable light than women. Since she defines the feminism's goal as the possession and exercise of authority and power, she may be consistent in her critique. The Bible does, however, portray such women as Eve, Sarah, Rachel, Rebekah, Rahab, and Bathsheba as wielding great power and shaping the course of history. One could just as well argue that males are more likely to be pictured unfavorably than females. After all, Satan is a male figure. Condemnation comes through Adam and not Eve.

Hampson concludes that the male oppression of the female in western culture has its origin in understanding God as Father and Jesus as a male.¹⁰ She points out that "Christology gives a male human being a status which is given to no woman."¹¹ This cannot be disrupted and the maleness of Christ cannot be altered without changing the shape of Christianity. Here we must agree with her argument. Of all the cultural expressions of Christ—white, brown, yellow—the only female expression was Christa, a figure in the Cathedral of St. John in New York that had to be identified with a name, simply because Christ cannot be expressed in feminine terms.¹²

Hampson will not accept the Christa figure, nor will she read the Bible selectively, favoring those sections that support her position, nor will she adjust the Bible to match her mindset. Though she prefers Schleiermacher's concept of a god who cannot be known apart from ourselves,¹³ she is aware that feminist theology may evolve into a goddess religion with attachment to the earth.¹⁴

After leaving the church, Hampson attached herself to a coven of witches where she was more at home in the syncretism of a goddess religion.¹⁵ Perhaps Hampson has done us a great service. She has alerted us to the fact that we cannot do theology piecemeal. In rejecting Christianity totally—the patriarchal history, the masculine images of God, the incarnation of God in the man Jesus, the selection of males as apostles, and a totally male clergy—Hampson has shown us that the Christianity is a unified system of thought. On its own terms, Christianity is a completely defensible system. She correctly ridicules every historical attempt to make an unbelievable Christianity believable. Rowan Williams, the Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford, remarks on the book's back cover that Hampson has set out "with sensitivity and disturbing clarity the difficulties in reconciling any kind of Christian theology with feminist insights." What this means is that it is indefensible logic to understand one issue in the Christian religion as divorced from another.

How we stand on incarnation must be related to our understanding of ministry. No church can have a feminized clergy and still insist on a masculine Christ. The inconsistency will soon be noticed. Hampson sees this and has made her choice. The LCMS

remains one of the few Protestant churches of any significance with a recognizable theological position, including one on the ordination of women. The Southern Baptists are opposed to the practice as a group, but they have no control over what the individual congregations do. Our weakness is that we do not seem capable of the same kind of integration that Daphne Hampson demonstrated, even if it was only in a negative way. A successful leader for the ordination of women in Scotland, she concluded that the biblical and historical Christian truths of the incarnation and the prohibitions against women clergy made it impossible for her to remain a Christian. For her, biblical Christology simply is not true. We should reverse the process and let our Christology determine the shape and form of what we think about the ministry and who may and may not be ministers. Only from such a holistic approach that involves a firm commitment to the biblical revelation and to the incarnation of God in Jesus can we come to a complete understanding of what it means to be ministers of the gospel. **LOGIA**

HYMN ON MARRIAGE

Lent 5, 1999
10 10 10 10

Adam and Eve in Paradise were wed,
Two people, yet one body and one head.
It was not good that man should be alone;
God joined them flesh to flesh and bone to bone.

Eve was the body, Adam was the head;
United, they shared food and drink and bed.
To Eve, his body, Adam gave his life,
Eve, to her head was a submissive wife.

In Mary's womb, Christ and His Church were wed,
United as one body and one Head.
It was not good that Christ should be alone;
God joined them flesh to flesh and bone to bone.

The Church, the body, Jesus is the head;
His life to her flows in the blood He shed.
In nuptial joy the holy two embrace,
In chalice, font, and absolution's grace.

On this glad day when man and wife are wed,
God joins the two, one body and one head.
As Eve and Adam, Jesus and His Bride,
May you in peace and joy and love abide.

Chad L. Bird

NOTES

1. Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).
2. Grant, 195-230.
3. Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 51.
4. Grant, 144-145.
5. *Ibid.*, 177.
6. Hampson, 5.
7. *Ibid.*, 9.
8. *Ibid.*, 16.
9. *Ibid.*, 20.
10. *Ibid.*, 75.
11. *Ibid.*, 76.
12. *Ibid.*, 77.
13. *Ibid.*, 172.
14. *Ibid.*, 135.
15. *Ibid.*, 111-112.

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