

Jesus the Gender-Bender and the Complementarity Myth

Grew up in 50's, era of strict gender norms. Men: warriors, workers, smokers & beer drinkers Women: homemakers, nurturers, pressured by advertising to conform to an impossible version of female beauty—make up, girdles, hair rollers. [sisters]

Dad's generation subjected to an **extreme ideal of masculinity** that prepared them for combat. 16 million served, a huge cadre returned with undiagnosed PTSD – their **masculine ideal** meant they couldn't share their pain with other. Divorce skyrocketed. Masculinity: "**be a man, hide pain, don't show vulnerability.**"

By late 60' cultural revolution in full swing. I wanted a different way to be a man: a **broader emotional range** than various shades of hunger and anger, able to say "I love you" without Novocain.

The Jesus I encountered in gospels at age 19 was a different kind of man than masculine ideal I absorbed: Courage that included being unafraid of human emotion—his own and others. Weeping in public. Compassionate, brilliant, prophetic. Lifelong attachment.

Yet, unbeknownst to me, charismatic Christianity I fell into was slowly drawn into a massive reaction to cultural revolution. Positives: connections, men sharing struggles. Negatives: a religious return to rigid gender roles [Author photo/labor.] Went through much grief in 80's and 90's sorting-sifting all that.

Today notice lingering effects of 1950's masculinity: Made parts of **ego more fragile**, not less: Hard to ask for emotional support. Lost health insurance when I lost my old job in 2014. **Surprisingly hard** on my ego to rely on being "covered spouse" on Julia's policy. Hard to move into a fantastic house that my labor didn't provide.

State obvious: our categories of gender and related concepts like masculinity (what it means to be a "real man") are **socially constructed**. **Vary** from culture to culture, **change** over time.

Some cultures recognize more than two genders. **Mishnah** (writings of rabbis) noted 7 genders. **Augustine**, African Bishop, recognized people who didn't fit gender binary—regarded this as positive thing. Many binaries, including male-female are **gross simplifications** of complex reality. Like **Day/Night** —either day or night, right? Well no; also dawn-dusk, where binary doesn't hold. (Earth never more beautiful than when it's not clearly day/night)

Inflexible understandings of gender and masculinity harmful ... and they have distorted our reading of Scripture. Today I want to **remove a cataract** on our lens for reading Scripture called “**complementarity**”... once removed, easier to see Jesus as a **gender-bender**. Effect: **free us** from the socially constructed masculine-feminine ideals many of us labor under.

The Complementarity Myth

For centuries Western church brazenly embraced patriarchy: Men should rule over women. Men can own women. Men are superior to women. As equality became a widely accepted value, patriarchy morphed into a softer version, called *Complementarity*.

Complementarity holds that "***God has created men and women equal in their essential dignity and human personhood, but different and complementary in function with male headship in the home and in the Church.***" (John Piper)

A **theological strategy** for defending male-only leadership while declaring male-female equal before God.

If patriarchy is the **pig**, complementarity is the **lipstick**.
But it's the **dominant view** in two largest sectors: RC & E

Complementarity used as lens to interpret Adam-Eve story. Claims what's important about Adam-Eve is how they **differ**. Story is used as foundation to assert theological priority of gender differences: to limit role of women, enforce gender norms, church stigmatizing sexual minorities ...a big deal, massive impact

James Brownson: ***The Bible, Gender, Sexuality*** debunks this interpretation of Adam & Eve story. Let me summarize:

1. **Scripture doesn't teach gender-complementarity.** In story of Adam-Eve, Eve is suitable not because she is different (hence she can complement/complete Adam) but because she is similar. Remember? First God creates Adam, then says its not good for the man to be alone. Then presents Adam with a parade of other creatures as possible companions. Finally, God puts Adam to sleep, pulls Eve out of his side, and presents her to Adam who says, "At last! Flesh of my flesh! Bone of my bones." It's Eve's **similarity**, not her **difference**, that makes her a suitable companion.

Brownson: term "one flesh" (two became one flesh) refers not to sex but to a formation of a **new kinship group**. Story about kinship based on similarity not sex contingent on anatomical differences.

2. **Scripture contains two strands on gender.** First strand assumes patriarchy as norm—rule of men over women. Second strands anticipates **end of patriarchy**—a time when male-female aren't part of being human at all: ***"In Christ there is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female, but all are one in Christ Jesus."***

Bible reflects patriarchy and bears witness to end of patriarchy ... and Jesus ushers in a new creation, marked by end of gender as a meaningful category difference, end of patriarchy.

When remove the **cataract of complementarity**, can see what's been there all along: **Jesus is a gender-bender**—didn't live in subjection or enforce gender norms.

Many ways Jesus violated modern American gender/masculinity norms because he was a Jewish man. Ease with emotion—his own others, freely weep in public, express his emotional pain to others w/o shame. But focus on 3 **unique ways** he was a **gender-bender**.

First, Jesus didn't participate in marriage, which was, in his era a patriarchal institution. Part of his witness to new creation dawning

"For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven." (Mt. 22:30)

Men married. Women were **given** in marriage. (Father transferred daughter to groom]
Marriage part of the rule of men over women.

Widowed 2012, no unmarried male pastor peers. Strange feeling. Wore wedding band for month, felt wrong: unmarried pastor

Jesus had a similar experience as a rabbi. Jewish men under obligation to marry [multiply!] ... unmarried rabbis oddity. Jesus was **not living up to his culture's masculinity norms** in a key area.

Second, Jesus renounced violence entirely. Not just criminal violence (assault-battery) but violence as a means to right wrongs. He didn't let threat of violence stop him (so no lack of courage) but he renounced using violence, even to advance a moral good.

Normally oppressed have right to fight for freedom. American ideal. In his era, leading/fighting in an army to defend freedom of people of Israel, was part of a masculine ideal. Men were made to be warriors as needed. Abraham, Samson, David—all warlords.

So in a very real sense Jesus refused to participate in what would have been understood as an **obligation of his gender**. Men who followed were **signing up to violate masculinity norms** of day.

Third, Jesus identified with the Divine Feminine tradition of Israel—lady wisdom, Sophia.

Briefly: Israel's vision of God monotheistic. But many and varied strands or traditions to depict/describe/bear witness to the divine. These strands not easily reconciled. Israel in general was at ease with many & varied voices in their tradition.

YHWH tradition depicts God as ready to go to war if need be. But there was an alternate tradition under umbrella of Divine Wisdom (Sophia) understood a feminine presence—dancing, creating, mysterious, seductive, peaceful, gentle. Never using violence.

Entire section of Scripture regarded as wisdom literature ... and this vision of God is found there, especially—Proverbs 8 extended discourse Lady Wisdom.

Jesus often identified himself with Sophia tradition. Facing critics who challenged his methods/teaching: ***“Wisdom is proved right by her children”*** He was embodying Wisdom (gendered female) and either his followers or his deeds were her children.

Letter of **James**, regarded as brother of Jesus (among letters, one that sounds most like Jesus) contrasts wisdom from below/above: ***“But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. ¹And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”***
[non-violent vision of divine action]

When St. Paul, writing of folly of the cross (strangeness of messiah who renounced violence but suffered it on the cross) ... contrasts the wisdom of this world with the wisdom of God and concludes by naming Jesus ***“the wisdom and power of God.”*** [Paul knew Hebrew tradition of Wisdom personified as a woman]

When Jesus speaks of himself as a **hen** who **gathers** her chicks under her wing, he's invoking an image that fits Lady Wisdom, who in Prov. 8 gathered children-disciples into her house

Dominant Western tradition of Christianity (RC/E) ignores this—it doesn't support rule of men over women. Eastern church more at ease. Major **cathedral** Istanbul, dedicated to **Hagia Sophia**.

Get this: **Russian Orthodox icon from Middle Ages, “Christ as Holy Wisdom”** [Hagia Sophia]” Christ appears as female/gender fluid.

To form a healthy connection-attachment to God, important to separate wheat-chaff in our vision/understanding of God

God is not the **author/enforcer/preserver/conserver** of our gender norms, particular versions of masculine/feminine ideals.

When these things are used to **oppress-pressure** us, imposed as **external ideals** by which we are **judged**, or by which we judge ourselves-others ... they become a **yoke, shoes** that don't fit us, **pants** that are too tight, **school uniform** that's too hot in September heat wave.

We can notice them and their bad effects on us and others.

We can **remove** them. We can **drain** them of any supposed authority: *you're not the boss of me anymore.*

These things are instructions that come with a piece of IKEA furniture, it turns out in the IKEA factory, someone put the wrong instructions in the wrong box. We tried to make instructions work, frustrating—OH! There's been a mistake. Pitch instructions and figure it out myself.

Meditation Exercise

Picture yourself in a room sitting comfortably with a friend or a loved one your trust ... real person or an imaginary person.

Take a little to imagine scene—a really great space ... who the friend, loved one (real/imaginary/alive in this life or next)

You're remarkable at ease, comfortable with this person.

Turns out earlier in the day, without thinking, you put on a wearing a wool sweater over say a cotton tee-shirt ... only it's too warm for sweater. Besides, you're slightly allergic to wool and it's making you itchy. You know how you sometimes chew a piece of gum too long, and realize half hour later, why am I still chewing this gum? Such a relief to throw it out? Something like that is happening with this sweater. You got used to it, made you uncomfortable but you been focused on other things...

In your imagination imagine that situation ... feel discomfort

Imagine this: you say to your friend, *Is it hot in here? I'm feeling warm, and itchy.*

And your friend says, "I was wondering why you were wearing that sweater, I thought you were allergic to wool. Why don't you just take it off." Feel the relief of taking sweater off.