

Human Nature and Sin

The systems of domination, then, are "male" only in the historical and sociological sense that males have shaped and benefited from them, not in the sense that they correspond to unique, evil capacities of males that women do not share. Women have no guarantees, because of a different "nature," that they will act differently. They do have some different experiences that may help them avoid acting in the same way, but only if they can develop the grounded self that avoids both timidity and reversed egoism.²⁵

Most Christian feminists believe that women sin differently than men do, but few are willing to say that women do not sin at all.

Sin has corporate, as well as individual, dimensions

Feminist theologians critique the individualistic definitions of sin that are so common in the Christian tradition. They agree that sin can be partially explained as a broken relationship with God or as wrong attitudes, such as lust, pride, and unbelief, but insist that sin affects all human relationships. Aruna Gnanadason described sin as the distortion of what should be a mutual relationship into one characterized by domination and control. "It can also be seen in women's passive acquiescence before such distortions. Therefore sin must be seen not merely as one individual personal straying away from the values of justice and peace but as a collective, systematic destruction of the community that is at the foundation of God's good creation."²⁶ Feminist theologians particularly name as sinful those actions against other human beings that the church has often ignored or downplayed, such as abuse, incest, and domestic violence. They have pointed out that not only the perpetrators are sinful, but also the individuals and institutions who enable such behavior, protect it with silence, or offer easy forgiveness without real repentance. Community is destroyed when people treat each other unfairly or fail to recognize the humanity of another person or group.

Feminist theologians acknowledge the persistent presence of structural and systemic sin, such as racism, sexism, and classism. Regina Coll explained, "Systemic sin is that sin which exists in the structures, institutions, customs, and laws of society. It is the sin for which no individual tends to feel responsible because it is the result of decisions, judgments, and actions of so many. It is the sin that results when reverence and respect for the human beings involved is missing."²⁷ Systemic sin or oppression occurs when one group of people has their feet on the necks of others, to use Sarah Grimke's image. Or as Letty Russell put it, sin is not giving others room to breathe.²⁸ Oppression occurs when "human beings attempt to play God over other human beings"²⁹ by refusing to

allow them the right to determine the course of their own lives.

In the American South during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, preachers often chastised slaves for disobedience to their masters. Was that the real sin? Abolitionists in the North condemned the sin of slaveholding, but many of them were racist themselves and did not think that freed slaves deserved equal treatment in society or a seat next to them in church or school. Some Southern white women during this time protested the unequal treatment of women, but still owned and mistreated slaves. Enslaved black men fought against racism, but expected their wives to serve them. Sin has many layers and no one is exempt. Even those who are oppressed may deny others the room to breathe.

A Critique of Feminism: An Adequate Sense of Sin?

Critics have suggested that feminist theologians identify sin as sexism and men as sexists and thus blame sin on others without recognizing the sinfulness of women. They find sin in patriarchal structures but never in themselves. Critics have also argued that feminists overemphasize social sin and oppression and fail to see that individual sin is an offense against God that requires personal repentance. Feminist theologians have a superficial sense of sin, the critics claim, and do not understand that transforming social structures and eliminating patriarchy will never cure the deep sin rooted in individual hearts.

It is true that many feminist theologians are relatively optimistic about human nature. They emphasize the goodness present in God's creation and the many abilities human beings possess. They see the great potential in human beings, who are created in God's image. They believe that God cares deeply about people; wants them to find wholeness; and gives them the power to heal, survive, and change.

Feminist theologians emphasize social transformation more than individual repentance; but most of them recognize that sin is present in all people, including women. Chung Hyun Kyung described the difficult lives of Asian women who are oppressed in many ways by a sinful patriarchal system. She insisted, though, that these women do not consider themselves free of sin. They recognize their own passive obedience and failure to trust themselves and other women.³⁰ In recent years white feminists have been increasingly perceptive about their own racism and classism and the ways white middle-class women have sinned by perpetuating injustice among women of other races and classes.

Some feminists are more likely to describe sin as Rita Nakashima Brock does, as damage that needs healing. In contrast to the traditional doctrine of original sin, Brock wrote that

sinfulness is neither a state that comes inevitably with birth nor something that permeates all human existence, but a symptom of the unavoidably relational nature of human existence through which we come to be damaged and damage others. . . . Sin emerges because our relationships have the capacity to destroy us, and we participate in destruction when we seek to destroy ourselves or others. Hence sin is a sign of our brokenheartedness, of how damaged we are, not of how evil, willfully disobedient, and culpable we are. Sin is not something to be punished, but something to be healed.³¹

For Brock, sin is most accurately imaged, not as a stubborn child yelling no, but as a wounded child shrinking from harsh words or punishment. Sin is more like a terminal illness than a destructive self-chosen behavior.

Sally Purvis offered a useful definition of sin when she wrote,

Sin is to be understood as the incapacity to trust the power of love and thus the necessity to try to control relationships with and the behavior of others. . . . Sin, in this view, is not a set of inappropriate or illegal or immoral behaviors but the odd incapacity to love, to choose love, to trust love. . . . Sin is the painful, frustrating, damaging process of wanting to heal—oneself or another or a relationship—and of continuing to wound and to be wounded.³²

The Bible often describes sin in terms of willfulness, as when the Israelites chose to follow other gods, or when the Corinthian Christians thumbed their noses at the weaker members of their community, or when religious legalists preferred rules over relationships. It is equally clear from Scripture that these behaviors arose from a deeply distorted understanding of life and relationships. The Israelites found it very difficult to trust God. The Corinthians needed to prove their superior Christian faith. The legalists found it safer to deal with a God of rules and regulations than with a God of surprising grace and mercy. Arrogant and willful behavior sometimes arises out of inadequacy, fear, and anxiety rather than out of pride. Even people who want to do good often do not, as expressed poignantly in Paul's awareness that despite his best intentions he chose to do evil rather than good (Rom 7:15).

Feminist theologians believe that sin pervades all human relationships and abilities. It damages self-confidence, it fosters pride and arrogance, it distorts what should be mutuality and trust into domination and subjection. God grieves for the ways that human beings distance themselves by rejecting or ignoring the divine presence, but God also grieves for the damage that human beings do to themselves and others. The failure to

regard one's self as a person created in God's image is a sin against God. The failure to regard another human being as a person created in God's image is a sin against God. The failure to fight against oppression and injustice is a sin against God. Sin exists in structures and individuals, in women and men, in good people and bad. Sin affects thought, actions, attitudes, and relationships. It is everywhere, but it does not have the last word.

CHAPTER 5

Christology

A cartoon drawing of a traditional manger scene showed the stable, the wise men, the star, and a few sheep. A voice from the stable announced, "It's a girl!"

Artist Edwina Sandys created a sculpture of a female form, arms outstretched as if hanging from a cross. The sculpture, entitled *Christa*, has created controversy wherever she is displayed. Critics say the statue defies the historical fact that Jesus was a man. Some viewers feel that the symbol of the cross is degraded or even blasphemed by a Christ in female form. Others are disturbed by the sexual overtones of the naked woman. Some people are troubled by yet another violent image of female suffering. A few people see in the sculpture the message that the death of Jesus symbolizes the pain of all human suffering.

The response to these visual images reveals various theological assumptions. Some people dismiss the cartoon and the sculpture because they are literally false. Jesus was a man. End of discussion. Other people consider these images offensive and uncomfortable. It insults Jesus, and them as well, to think of him as a woman. These imaginative reconstructions of important events in the life of Jesus pose an important theological question: What difference does it make that Jesus was male?

Some feminists conclude that if the central truth of Christianity is that God became a man, then men are to be considered superior to women. If the central figure of Christianity is a heroic male figure human beings must obey, worship, and adore in order to receive salvation, then this religious tradition is simply another example of a man telling women what to do, which cannot be good news for women. If a man is the most important figure in Christianity, then women can never be equal to men,

because if the starring role must be played by a man, women will always be limited to supporting roles.

The maleness of Jesus may seem so obvious that further discussion is irrelevant. Some of my students have asked, with more than a trace of irritation, "Jesus was a man. Why are we talking about this?" The historical reality of the maleness of Jesus cannot be questioned or even discussed without challenging the wisdom of God's plan. Christians must simply acknowledge that God had good reasons for taking on male flesh.

One such reason is that in a patriarchal culture a man was far more suited to be a leader, a prophet, and a teacher. A woman may not have had the freedom or the resources to travel. Her words and actions would not have been respected or even accepted. The cultural situation of the time permitted only a male Messiah.

Another explanation for the maleness of Jesus is that God the Father naturally and necessarily chose to reveal "himself" in male form, because God is a male and because maleness more adequately represented God. If women were biologically and intellectually defective and naturally in a state of subjection, as many theologians argued, then of course Christ had to take on male nature because female nature was not only inadequate, but unreasonable and even somewhat revolting.

Christian feminists have been unwilling to dismiss Christianity as completely without value, but neither can they accept without further discussion the claim that the maleness of Jesus was theologically necessary. This chapter will explore some of the ways in which feminist theologians have understood the life and work of Jesus in his own time and his continuing significance in the present.

Who Was Jesus?

There has never been a single understanding of or perspective on Jesus. Seventy years after his death and resurrection, four different Gospels or accounts of his life existed, each written for a specific audience and highlighting certain aspects of his life and ministry. Matthew wrote for Jewish readers and emphasized the way Jesus fulfilled prophecies from the Jewish Scriptures. Mark wrote for Christians who experienced persecution and emphasized the suffering of Jesus. Luke wrote for a gentile or non-Jewish audience and stressed that the message of Jesus was for the whole world. John was written somewhat later than the other three and dealt with the increasing separation of and tensions between Jews and Christians.

During the next twenty centuries opinions about Jesus became even more diverse. He was portrayed as a peacemaker and a warrior, a mar-

tyr and a judge, a king and a shepherd. In the first three centuries of its history, Christianity was illegal and therefore had relatively little power and influence in the secular world. The government periodically persecuted Christians who refused to renounce their faith. During this period artists often portrayed Christ as the good shepherd who comforted suffering Christians. After the conversion of the emperor Constantine in 312 CE, Christianity became the accepted religion of the Roman Empire and gained enormous power and influence. Artists now portrayed Christ as a powerful king or judge. A fifth-century mosaic in a Roman church shows Christ seated on a throne, holding a sword and looking fierce and dangerous. When Christianity was weak and struggling, Christ was portrayed as a comforting presence who did not threaten the established political powers. When Christianity gained power, the image of Christ became more threatening, as if to compel belief. The perception of Jesus was shaped by cultural realities.

There has been a great deal of variety in the ways people understand and experience Jesus. In the early twentieth century Albert Schweitzer read a number of biographies of Jesus and concluded that each author's personality and interests helped to shape the Jesus he described. A life of Jesus said more about its author than about its subject.¹ Nearly a century later, it is not surprising that African American theologians consider the implications of Jesus' race and the meaning of a black Messiah, and that feminist theologians consider the implications of Jesus' gender. Jesus has been a powerful and influential symbol in Western culture, and various groups and individuals find that they need to discern his significance for their lives.

Despite all the diverse perspectives on Jesus, not everything was completely open to interpretation. Some distinctive claims about Jesus were made and often vigorously debated. For almost two thousand years most Christians agreed that Jesus was no ordinary human being. He was God's only begotten Son and the Word who "became flesh and lived among us" (John 3:16; 1:14). He possessed miraculous powers to heal and to cast out demons, and he also claimed the ability to forgive sins. He identified himself with God, even calling God his Father, which infuriated many of the Jewish people he encountered, who believed there was only one God. He also identified himself as the Messiah, or Christ, the anointed one who the prophets had promised would bring salvation to Israel. After he died on the cross he rose from the dead and later ascended into heaven to be with God. Several centuries later, in 325, the Council of Nicaea tried to settle a fierce debate by affirming that Jesus was not a created being and not merely human, but of the same substance as God.

Christians also claimed that Jesus was fully human. Humanity was not a mask or a disguise that enabled a divine being to pretend to be human, but a reality. Jesus experienced hunger, thirst, exhaustion, and temptation. He differed from human beings only in his perfection. He was tempted, but never sinned. This mix of human and divine in Jesus, like his relationship with God, is not easy to fathom. In 451 the Council of Chalcedon attempted to resolve debate by affirming that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine.

Both of these doctrinal statements have been challenged, but during the past two centuries an increasing number of questions have been posed about the identity of Jesus. Can he be fully human if he is perfect and sinless? Can a divine figure be fully human if he continues to possess divine powers? A number of scholars have suggested that Jesus was a very good man who lived an exemplary life, but he was not divine. He may have been particularly aware of and connected to God, but he was not God himself. Some scholars question the divinity of Jesus because it seems irrational and impossible. Others suggest that if he really was divine he would have possessed more power and could have attacked the status quo more effectively than he did. Jacquelyn Grant asked, for example, "If Jesus was more than human—that is, also divine, why did he not miraculously or directly overthrow the evil powers which keep women in oppression?"²

Other Christians refuse to assert that Jesus is divine or unique because it leads to the assumption that Christianity is the only, or at least the best, way to encounter God. This claim has led to various forms of cultural and religious imperialism. The Crusaders in the eleventh and twelfth centuries believed that they were justified in murdering Muslims and destroying their property because they did not believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ. The Nazis and other groups throughout history offered a similar rationale for the murder of Jews. Missionaries preached Jesus Christ to the "heathen" or the "pagans," but did not respect the cultural and religious beliefs of the world's people. Carter Heyward concluded that "Christian faith and practice is necessarily destructive to most people in the world insofar as it is cemented in the insistence that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior of all."³

If Jesus is simply another human being, though, why are his opinion and example so important? Why spend a chapter on Christology if he is simply one of us? Why debate the meaning of his maleness if Jesus was simply an ordinary human being? Why do his teachings matter twenty centuries later? Eleanor McLaughlin observed pointedly, "If Jesus is not something more than a first-century Jewish rabbi, this enterprise is more trouble than it is worth."⁴ In the past two centuries Christian feminists

and others have argued that Jesus was a very good person who models a relationship with God, inspires the development of community, and encourages people to resist the powers that enslave them. This claim poses the question of whether an ordinary human being has such powers. Certainly there are heroic martyr figures like Martin Luther King, Jr., who serves as a role model despite his human limitations. Or was Jesus unique, then and now, because he provides not only an example of a good life, but also the power to live it?

Was Jesus a Feminist? Biblical Perspectives on Jesus

A common Christian interpretation of Jesus and his relationship to women asserts that he called only men to be his disciples. He never ordained women or made any radical changes in the status of women. He spent far more time with men and regularly affirmed male leadership. If he had wanted women to have a different role in church and society, he certainly would have made a point of it. Jesus was nice to women, but he never expected them to be treated as equals in the church. Such a reading tends to support the status quo and traditional roles for women.

Others interpreters draw from the Bible a profoundly different picture of Jesus. In 1971 Leonard Swidler wrote an article entitled "Jesus was a Feminist"⁵ in which he noted that Jesus cared for women and elevated their status by taking them seriously. He resisted patriarchal structures and traditional assumptions and clearly demonstrated his support for women. Other feminist biblical scholars have argued that the word *feminist* may be anachronistic when applied to Jesus, but they agree that he treated women well.

In a culture where men did not speak with women on a regular basis, Jesus held theological conversations with them. In a culture where men were not supposed to touch women, Jesus encountered a woman who had been bent over for eighteen years, touched her, and healed her (Luke 13:10-17). When a woman with a bleeding disease that made her ritually unclean touched his clothing (thereby making him unclean also), he was not offended, but praised her great faith (Mark 5:34).

In a culture where women were supposed to be silent and docile, Jesus encountered a foreign woman who talked back. She asked him to heal her daughter, but he refused, explaining that he had been sent to the Israelites. Her courageous and thought-provoking reply encouraged Jesus to change his mind and expand the scope of his ministry to the gentile world (Mark 7:24-30).

In a culture where women had little education and some religious leaders believed that it was blasphemous to teach sacred texts to women,

Jesus affirmed Mary of Bethany for her desire to study and learn, even when her sister Martha complained that Mary neglected her kitchen duties (Luke 10:38-42).

In a culture where women were not trusted to testify as witnesses, Jesus appeared to women after his resurrection and charged them to go and tell what they had seen. Though some of the disciples dismissed their words as an "idle tale," the Gospels assert that women first proclaimed the good news that Jesus Christ was risen (Matt 28:1-10; Luke 24:1-12). Earlier in his career Jesus encountered a Samaritan woman and asked her for a drink, even though that was against the religious and social customs of his time. After a theological conversation in which she recognized that he was the Messiah, she went and told her people about him, and "many believed in him because of the woman's testimony" (John 4:1-42).

In a culture where women were sometimes distrusted for their sexuality, Jesus related to women in an open, honest way. To the woman caught in adultery he simply said, "Go, and sin no more" (John 8:1-11 KJV). When a woman came uninvited to a dinner party and washed his feet with her tears and anointed his head with expensive ointment, he received her gifts without revulsion or discomfort (Mark 14:3-9).

The Gospels suggest that Jesus cared deeply about women and valued their contributions. He encouraged women to learn and to speak. He healed women, learned from them, and accepted their financial and emotional sustenance. He affirmed women as valuable and fully human, so it seems legitimate to conclude that he was and is a positive figure for women. Dorothy Sayers summarized this perspective in an essay written in 1947:

Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man—there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as "The women, God help us!" or "The ladies, God bless them!"; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unself-conscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything "funny" about women's nature.⁶

If Jesus can be understood so positively, why is there a problem? He seems relatively egalitarian for his time. What's not to like? Feminist theologians have highlighted three problems that stem from the claim that Jesus was a feminist.

First, the fact that Jesus was nice to women does not mean that he actually challenged the structures of patriarchy and sexism. He supported Mary of Bethany, but he did not publicly affirm the right of all women to study and learn. He did not encourage men to share domestic work and child care in order to give women more freedom. He did not teach the importance of equality in a clear and unambiguous manner.⁷ Jesus' kindness to women was not continued by the church, which has been ambivalent and even hostile toward them. Church leaders have argued that just because Jesus was nice to women does not mean he wanted them to be ordained or to hold leadership roles. Feminists wonder why Jesus did not have a more lasting influence on the church, which developed in his name. If Jesus really cared about women, why hasn't that concern been clear in the history of Christianity?

A second problem is whether a truly feminist Jesus would expect women to look up to, worship, and obey a male role model. Mary Daly argued that women do not need either biblical texts or role models from the past to justify their struggle for equality. In response to the claim that Jesus was a feminist, she said tartly, "Fine, great, but even if he wasn't, I am." She advised women to trust the validity of their own experience, not to imitate someone from a very different world.⁸

Other feminists argue that the problem is the *male* role model. Carter Heyward noted the expectation in Christianity that women "must constantly look up—for inspiration, leadership, role-modeling, and redemption—to a man."⁹ Jesus is portrayed not only as a man, but also as a perfect, sinless, divine man. Can women live up to his example? Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza doubted that Jesus could be a role model for women, "since feminist psychological liberation means exactly the struggle of women to free themselves from all male internalized norms and models."¹⁰

Feminists have also questioned the *kind* of role model Jesus embodies—obedient, subordinate, submissive, suffering without complaint. Women have been taught all too well by the Christian tradition that although they do not resemble Jesus enough to be priests, they can imitate his sacrificial love, humility, meekness, and passive acceptance of suffering. Women do not need more encouragement to deny themselves and live for others, from Jesus or from any other model.

A third problem with the claim that Jesus is a feminist is that scholars sometimes justify their arguments by pointing out the perceived defi-

ciencies of Judaism and the nasty way the Jews treated women. They then claim that Jesus repudiated the horribly legalistic, misogynist religious system in which he was reared. Jewish feminists have replied that these charges are inaccurate, and that it is unfair and anti-Semitic to portray Judaism as completely sexist while lifting up Jesus and Christianity as the great redeemers of women. Jesus was a Jew whose ethics, religious life, and relationship with God were significantly formed by the teachings and practices of Jewish law. During his ministry Jesus criticized the rigidities and excesses of religion, especially legalism and exclusivism; but he would probably be equally critical today of some of the rigidities of the Christian faith. He did not repudiate Judaism or create a new religion out of nothing. Christianity is deeply rooted in Judaism, and therefore Judaism cannot simply be dismissed as oppressive to women in order to make Christianity look more egalitarian.¹¹

Was Jesus a feminist? The term may be anachronistic, but his affirmation of and relationships with women and his recognition of their full humanity suggests that he sought justice for women well before such an action was common.

Can a Male Savior Save Women? The Meaning of Maleness

The most trenchant feminist criticism is not directed at the person of Jesus because, as the previous discussion suggests, he was generally supportive of women. The problem is the way his maleness has been misunderstood and misused to exclude women from the priesthood and from full equality. A common English translation of the Nicene Creed says that Jesus "became man for us men and for our salvation," which implies that the important theological issue was that Jesus became a man, particularly for the salvation of men. A more accurate translation of the Latin would say that he "became human for us and for our salvation." The question is not simply one of semantics or politically correct language, but of who is included in the salvation of God.

Gender was certainly part of Jesus' identity as a person, as it is for all human beings; however, the essential theological point of the Incarnation was not that he became a male, but that he became fully human. Theologians in the early church insisted that Jesus was not just pretending to be human, nor was he dressed in human flesh to disguise his divine nature. If he was not fully human, then the incarnation was a sham and he could not have been tempted as humans were. Jesus could only save human nature by taking it on and becoming one with it, or as

one common way of putting the matter in the early church said, "Whatever is not assumed, is not redeemed." If Jesus had assumed only male nature, in a way that did not fully include female nature, it would be impossible for women to be saved. Clearly, that is not the case. Those Christians who insist that Jesus *had* to be a man and that maleness was somehow essential to the Incarnation may be treading on thin theological ice.

The maleness of Christ is also misused when the church claims that those who represent Christ must be male. Aquinas and others believed that although women could be redeemed by Christ, their female nature made them essentially different from him and therefore they could not represent him in the priesthood. The Vatican stated explicitly in 1976 that priests must bear a physical resemblance to Christ in order to represent him. Priests need not be young or Jewish, but they must be male. Rosemary Radford Ruether observed,

Since this strange new version of the imitation of Christ does not exclude a Negro, a Chinese or a Dutchman from representing a first-century Jew, or a wealthy prelate from representing a carpenter's Son, or sinners from representing the saviour, we must assume this imitation of Christ has now been reduced to one essential element, namely, male sex.¹²

Early in the nineteenth century, Jarena Lee made a similar point to those who wanted to deny her the right to preach based on the maleness of Jesus. "If the man may preach, because the Saviour died for him, why not the woman? seeing he died for her also. Is he not a whole Saviour, instead of half one? as those who hold it wrong for a woman to preach, would seem to make it appear."¹³

Feminist theologians do not deny that Jesus was a man, as is sometimes assumed, but they refuse to use maleness in ways are theologically inappropriate. Elizabeth Johnson wrote:

The fact that Jesus of Nazareth was a man is not in question. His maleness is constitutive for his personal identity, part of the perfection and limitation of his historical reality, and as such it is to be respected. His sex is as intrinsic to his historical person as are his race, class, ethnic heritage, culture, his Jewish religious faith, his Galilean village roots, and so forth. The difficulty arises, rather, from the way this one particularity of sex, unlike the other historical particularities, is interpreted in sexist theology and practice. Consciously or unconsciously, Jesus' maleness is lifted up

and made essential for his christic function and identity, thus blocking women precisely because of their female sex from participating in the fullness of their Christian identity as images of Christ.¹⁴

How should the maleness of Jesus be understood? Feminist theologians believe that the maleness of Christ was not essential to the Incarnation. God may well have had a good reason for taking on male flesh rather than female, but the reasons had more to do with the culture of the first century than with the meaning of the Incarnation or the gender of God. Maleness may have been a cultural necessity, but it was not a theological necessity.

Perhaps God chose maleness to make a point to both men and women. Elizabeth Johnson wrote: "If in a patriarchal culture a woman had preached compassionate love and enacted a style of authority that serves, she would most certainly have been greeted with a colossal shrug. Is this not what women are supposed to do by nature?"¹⁵ Jesus was able to be a servant because he chose to be, not because he had to be. A male Jesus was able to challenge patriarchy and choose to live without the privileges of maleness in the same way that the human Jesus chose to live without divine powers. He chose to spend most of his time with the weak, the broken, the outcast. He chose to relate to people as a servant rather than as a ruler. He chose to be received rather than to force himself upon an unwilling world. He chose to be gentle and relational rather than harsh and domineering. Such a way of life is a powerful gift for both men and women, and as Johnson observed: "The heart of the problem is not that Jesus was a man but that too many men have not followed his footsteps, insofar as patriarchy has defined their self-identity and relationships."¹⁶

Could God have become incarnate in a woman? It would seem that an all-powerful God could have chosen to take female form and thereby overcome all the patriarchal assumptions and cultural obstacles. It would have made a profound statement to women if God had clearly affirmed women and femaleness. But just as the divine took on the limitations of the human, so God also chose to work within the limits of his-torical reality and human freedom. God came at a particular time and took on flesh as a particular person. God accommodated to human capacity, and one cannot be a human without having a particular gender. The choice of male gender, however, was not necessary because God was male or to make salvation effective or because female flesh was not worthy of God. A male savior can save women because the saving significance of Jesus is not his maleness, but his humanity.

Positive Models of Jesus

Feminist theologians have spent much time and energy criticizing erroneous interpretations of Jesus, but they have also made many creative contributions to revisioning the way he is understood. Many feminist theologians have found Jesus to be a positive and empowering person and symbol.

Liberator

The Gospels contain many stories in which Jesus liberates or sets a person free from the bondage of sin; physical or mental illness; or social, economic, or religious oppression. Like the prophets before him, he criticized the institutions that perpetuated poverty and human suffering and challenged them to change. Rosemary Radford Ruether wrote of this role: "His ability to be liberator does not reside in his maleness but, on the contrary, in the fact that he has renounced this system of domination and seeks to embody in his person the new humanity of service and mutual empowerment."¹⁷

Feminist theologians from the Third World also speak frequently about Jesus' ability to liberate from all the oppressions that affect women and men of different races and classes throughout the world.

In the person and praxis of Jesus Christ, women of the three continents find the grounds of our liberation from all discrimination: sexual, racial, social, economic, political, and religious. . . . This means that Christology is integrally linked with action on behalf of social justice and the defense of each person's right to life and to a more humane life.¹⁸

Despite what they have sometimes been told about Jesus as primarily the Savior of their souls, these women have a vivid sense of Jesus as a very present help in trouble who does not sit unconcerned in heaven but participates in their struggle. He does not support the status quo and the oppression it often fosters, but actively worked in his own time, and works now, to liberate people from apartheid, racism, poverty, and exploitation.

It is possible that emphasizing the liberating work of Jesus could produce passivity and discourage human efforts for justice. If Jesus will fix everything or if transformation will not occur until heaven, then human beings have little role to play. Carter Heyward warned that women, black, poor, and gay and lesbian Christians

participate in the perpetuation of our own oppression insofar as we allow our visions and energies to be drawn toward a heavenly man and away from our human situation as sisters and brothers, by fixing our attention on the spiritual accomplishments of a divine Savior rather than on the spiritual possibilities of a concerted human commitment that can be inspired by the Jesus story as a human story: a story of human faith, human love, and human possibility as the agency of divine movement in history.¹⁹

Jesus liberates the soul from sin, but his work does not end there. He liberates human beings from the oppressions that bind them and encourages, empowers, and enables their continued efforts for their own liberation and that of others.

Co-sufferer

What about those women whose liberation is incomplete and who continue to suffer from racism, sexism, and economic oppression? Many feminist theologians, especially from the Third World, find in Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection a meaning for their own suffering. The suffering of Jesus gives them courage. A South African woman wrote, "There are times when I want to give up, but the pain that Christ went through gives me the strength to go on preaching the good news of a liberating God."²⁰

Jacquelyn Grant and other womanist theologians also emphasize the role of Jesus as divine co-sufferer. In the midst of their experience of slavery, African American women developed the conviction that because Jesus had suffered unjustly he was particularly able to understand their unjust suffering and to give them comfort and strength. "This vision of Jesus did not encourage passivity, as Grant observed:

To affirm Jesus' solidarity with the "least of the people" is not an exercise in romanticized contentment with one's oppressed status in life. For as the Resurrection signified that there is more to life than the cross for Jesus Christ, for Black women it signifies that their tri-dimensional existence is not the end, but it merely represents the context in which a particular people struggle to experience hope and liberation.²¹

Korean women also spoke of the presence of Jesus in their suffering, emphasizing that he does not merely share their misery, but transforms it. They described their particular experience of suffering as *han*, a concept that unites their resentment and indignation about injustice with a

deep sense of resignation, defeat, and powerlessness. Jesus not only offers healing and comfort, but also transforms the sense of defeat into an "energizing force for social change."²² He chose to live in poverty and humility, and therefore is particularly able to be in solidarity with those who suffer and to give them strength and courage, not to passively accept their lives, but to survive and to resist.

Feminine imagery for Jesus

The final image of Jesus is drawn, not from contemporary feminist theology, but from the fourteenth century. Julian of Norwich described several ways in which Jesus Christ can be imaged as Mother. First, he gives birth to humanity through his death. "He carries us within him in love and travail, until the full time when he wanted to suffer the sharpest thorns and cruel pains that ever were or will be, and at the last he died." Jesus wanted to continue working in human lives, so he nourished them. "The mother can give her child to suck of her milk, but our precious Mother Jesus can feed us with himself, and does, most courteously and tenderly, with the blessed sacrament, which is the precious food of true life. . . . The mother can lay her child tenderly to her breast, but our tender Mother Jesus can lead us easily into his blessed breast through his sweet open side." Mothers then rear their children, changing their methods as appropriate to the age of the child. When children get in trouble they go to their mothers for help, and Jesus asks that human beings come to him in the same way. Julian wrote, "So he wants us to act as a meek child, saying: My kind Mother, my gracious Mother, my beloved Mother, have mercy on me. I have made myself filthy and unlike you, and I may not and cannot make it right except with your help and grace."²³

This powerful imagery is not without its difficulties. To speak of Mother Jesus with male pronouns causes the same sort of disjuncture as did the "breasts of God the Father" in the discussion of God language. Linking the feminine so explicitly with maternal qualities has the potential to create limiting stereotypes of women as mothers and nothing else. Using maternal imagery to describe the suffering and sacrifice of Jesus may reinforce the notion that mothers should sacrifice everything for their children. Still, Julian's language is profound and provocative and offers an intriguing way to image the role of Jesus in human life.²⁴

Does Maleness Matter?

Brian Wren reflected on his attempt to understand the questions feminist theologians have posed about the maleness of Jesus.

How would we feel about praying to a female Savior? What would it mean for us if a woman had been crucified for our sins? How would it feel to be taught, from boyhood, that God became Woman for the salvation of all women? . . . Asking myself these questions, I found a residual prejudice: the idea of God becoming incarnate in a woman startled me more than the idea of God becoming incarnate in a man. . . . I realize that if God's Anointed One was a woman, then however deeply saved and called I was by her life, death, and resurrection, I would always be aware that she was she and I was he. Her femaleness would highlight the differences between us and would be (potentially or actually) an obstacle to faith.²⁵

Wren went on to describe a Jesus who challenged patriarchy and chose to live as a servant without the trappings of power. He chose to care for the poor and marginalized. He spent his ministry offering freedom, healing, forgiveness. He gave people courage. He listened and cared. He was a remarkable presence in his time and continues even now to enable, encourage, and heal. Wren wrote a hymn that summarizes this understanding of Jesus.

Great God, in Christ you call our name and then receive us as your
own,
not through some merit, right or claim, but by your gracious love
alone.
We strain to glimpse your mercy-seat and find you kneeling at
our feet.
Then take the towel, and break the bread, and humble us, and call
us friends.
Suffer and serve till all are fed and show how grandly love intends
to work till all creation sings, to fill all worlds, to crown all
things.
Great God, in Christ you set us free your life to live, your joy to
share.
Give us your Spirit's liberty to turn from guilt and dull despair
and offer all that faith can do while love is making all things
new.²⁶

The role of Jesus in human life and in the Christian tradition ultimately has little to do with maleness and everything to do with a love that is making all things new.

CHAPTER 6

Salvation

In her novel *The Rapture of Canaan*, Sheri Reynolds tells the story of twelve-year-old Ninah Huff, a Southern girl who belonged to the Church of Fire and Brimstone and God's Almighty Baptizing Wind, a family church that her grandfather began and led. The church had a long list of rules and strict punishments for disobedience. Salvation came to those who knew their place, did as they were told, believed as Grandpa Herman did, and occasionally "got the spirit" and spoke in tongues.¹

Salvation through obedience and correct belief has been a common theme in Christian tradition. The apostle Paul told his jailer to "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Acts 16:31). Revivalists preach that people can be saved by coming forward, confessing their sins, and accepting Jesus into their hearts.

Other deeply religious people have recognized that their faith and good works have not been enough to save them from oppression. The psalmists repeatedly ask, "How long, O Lord?" How long will God leave them in despair and trouble before rescuing them? This cry has been heard from places such as South Africa or El Salvador where people are oppressed and enslaved because of their race or political opinions. In the movie *Romero* a young woman named Lucia told Archbishop Oscar Romero that her people in El Salvador needed to hear a message of hope from the church, because "it's so bad here." Lucia combined her faith in God with political activism against an oppressive government, as did Romero, and eventually both were murdered by those who wanted to preserve the government's power. They sought a salvation that would affect both the soul and the body.

American culture, on the other hand, offers a vision of salvation and

the good life that emphasizes the body rather than the soul. Television commercials and news and fashion magazines illustrate the good life: Prozac, alcohol, cigars. Money, lots of money. A hot car. A thin, fit body. The latest self-help book. A cruise to an exotic island. The government promises salvation through the right welfare program, tax reform, or peace initiative. Pop psychology says that salvation comes from healing the inner child or becoming assertive.

Myths and fairy tales offer vivid images of salvation. Snow White awoke from her deathlike trance when the prince kissed her. The dying Beast was transformed back into a prince when Beauty (Belle) said she loved him. Simba found his vocation, his place in the circle of life. Pinocchio became a real boy. In fairy tales evil is punished or destroyed, truth and love win in the end, and the good people live happily ever after.

It seems to be part of the human condition to hope for things to be different and to pray for miracles. And things do change. Good things sometimes come from bad situations. Deeply wounded people do survive the horrible things that happen to them. People receive incredible surprises and undeserved gifts. They are loved and love in return. Such experiences of grace and goodness begin to illuminate the Christian doctrine of salvation.

Traditional and Biblical Views of Salvation

Many Christians believe that salvation rescues individuals from the consequences of sin and permits their souls to enter heaven when they die. The unsaved person is estranged from God. The saved person has a relationship with God that provides happiness and future security. Salvation affects the soul more than the body. It offers heavenly rewards to the individual, not earthly improvements to social structures. Salvation makes people right with God, but says little about right relationships within society.

The definition of salvation is closely linked to the definition of sin. If sin is a broken relationship between an individual and God, then the obvious solution is reconciliation, which occurs by repentance, conversion, "getting right with God," and developing a personal relationship with Christ. If sin is defying God through pride, self-seeking, and arrogance, then salvation requires a breaking of the self. Sinful people must recognize their weakness and failure, confess their need for God, and admit their inability to save themselves or their world. Salvation comes when the self is broken and gives up its own desires. Saved people will be self-sacrificing, unselfish, and not demand their own way.

The biblical understanding of salvation is actually much broader than

this and includes the well-being of both individuals and society. The Hebrew Scriptures emphasized the salvation of a people or a nation. God made a covenant with Abraham and Sarah and promised they would be ancestors of a great nation. When the people of this nation became slaves in Egypt, God saved them and delivered them from oppression (Exod 14:30). God chose to save Israel in part so that individuals could develop relationships with God, but primarily so that Israel would be a light to the nations and a means by which God related to the whole world. God blessed Israel in order to bless all the nations (Gen 12:2-3).

Later in the Israelites' history, after they repeatedly broke their covenant with God and failed to live as God's people, the prophets called them back to right relationships. Religious faith meant not simply believing in and obeying God, but also doing justice for the neighbor and treating the stranger with compassion. When the Israelites were defeated in battle and exiled from their land, the prophets promised that in the future they would find shalom, or wholeness and peace, both as individuals and as a nation. Jeremiah 31:7-14, for example, contains many images of salvation. The scattered people will be gathered. They shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord. Their life shall become like a watered garden. They will rejoice and be merry. Other biblical texts suggest that shalom will include economic equity, justice, and healing.

Similarly in the Gospels, Jesus made it clear that salvation affects every aspect of life. He forgave sins and invited people to repent and enter into a relationship with God; but he also healed physical diseases, cast out demons, cared for the poor and outcast, and challenged the religious and social customs of his time. He announced that in the kingdom of God the old rules about hierarchy, power, and wealth will be reversed. The meek will inherit the earth, and the poor will have a seat of honor at the banquet table. Salvation for Jesus involved wholeness, healing, and reconciliation for individuals and for society. He did not promise instant transformation, but the hope of the Kingdom and its radically new social structures.

Twenty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, when it became clear that society had not yet been radically transformed, the apostle Paul tried to articulate the meaning of salvation for the early Christians. He introduced the concept of justification by faith and stressed the need for individual reconciliation with God. "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God" (Rom 5:8-9). Salvation for Paul meant that individuals are forgiven and offered new life and hope. When they encountered the grace of God, Christians

would live responsibly with their neighbors and begin to break down the barriers that divided Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, and men and women.

Later in the church's history, especially when it struggled against the powerful Roman Empire, salvation was often understood even more narrowly as the arrival of the soul into heaven after death. For Christians living with a government that sometimes killed them for their faith, this view was comforting and realistic, but it represented a major shift from the Israelite notion of shalom.

Despite the variety of images and the broad scope of salvation evident in the Bible, this individualistic, future-oriented view has dominated Christian thinking for most of its history. It allowed white slave owners to encourage slaves to be saved without questioning the legitimacy of slavery. It allowed wealthy businessmen to donate large sums of money to Christian institutions without paying their workers a living wage. It allowed the church fathers to pronounce that women could enter heaven, but not the pulpit. In response to this (mis)understanding of the tradition, feminist theologians have posed three questions.

Christian Feminist Critique of the Tradition

Can women be saved?

At first glance this seems like an outrageous question. Discussions about salvation in the Christian tradition usually emphasize that all men are sinful and need to be saved. The Nicene Creed affirms that Jesus became man "for us men and for our salvation." Are women included? They are usually assumed to be a subset of men, but in light of Christian beliefs that women are not fully human, that women are responsible for sin, and that Christ could not have been a woman, it is not outrageous but reasonable to wonder if salvation is fully effective for women or if they can be saved at all. Most Christians would insist that women can be saved, but a close look at their practices suggests that salvation may function differently for women. When men are forgiven and restored they become capable of ministry and service without restrictions, even though they continue to sin; but in some traditions women still have restrictions. Most of the Southern Baptist Convention refuses to ordain women because of Eve's sin. Salvation is apparently able to transform women sufficiently to keep them out of hell, but not enough to allow them a sacramental role at the altar. Salvation offers spiritual equality but not equal roles.

Such arguments are rooted in Scripture, especially in 1 Timothy.² The