

**‘SEXING UP GOD’:
A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON GENDER MOVEMENTS**

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For much of the history of Western Christianity, our God-talk has implied that God exists above and beyond much of the stuff of everyday life, including gender and sexuality, politics, social movements and debates on public policy. Our Christian tradition has exhibited a fair measure of ambivalence towards sexuality and God. We have debated or internally struggled with questions of whether sex is a necessary evil or inherently good, whether women and men are ordained by God to be equal, and whether we should describe God in purely masculine images or expand our understandings and metaphors for the divine.

The biblical witness suggests that God is intimately involved with the everyday, and that the creation of humanity as male and female was a deliberate and celebrated act of God’s creativity and desire to create and nurture relationships. Jesus’ parables, which sought to offer a vision of the kingdom of God, utilised images from the domestic and public spheres and from tasks traditionally ascribed to women and men. From this, we might gain a glimpse of God’s vision for the future of humanity in which the public/private and work/family dichotomies are less powerful and in which the sacred finds its way into all of the aspects of life that have been considered secular or profane. From this we might conclude that, whilst God doesn’t need any ‘sexing up’, our God-talk and understanding of the relationship between God and humanity does.

We are two young pastors who have discovered that God is involved in all aspects of our public and private lives. At the same time we have been influenced by the gender movements of our, and previous, eras and are curious to explore the implications of the Women’s and Men’s Movement on our vocations – both our personal lives and our ministries.

Carolyn

Growing up in an affirming family and a girls’ school “anything you can do I can do better” environment, the women’s movement probably seemed archaic and unnecessary. But arriving at Melbourne Uni and Ormond College at the start of the 1990s I discovered a world in which gender issues could not be ignored. Sexual assaults on campus, the traditions of a formerly all-male residential college, sexual harassment allegations directed at prominent professors and constant debates on gender issues took this young girl from a suburban Baptist church and introduced her to the need for the women’s movement.

Several years later, well versed in the feminisms of Dale Spender, Kate Millett and Carol Pateman a calling to theological study led me to a discovery of the emerging tradition of feminist theology and Christian feminism. I was relieved and enlivened by the brilliance, critical thinking and deep spirituality evident in the work of Letty Russell, Elizabeth Johnson and Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza. Now a candidate for ordination in the Baptist Union of Victoria, and a pastor in a Baptist Church, I have received both affirmation and criticism, encouragement and blatant discrimination as a young woman in ministry. “You’d make a great bloke” has been offered as a

compliment whilst, at times, those who had never shown concern that the uninterrupted male voice representing the church might have excluded women, have become agitated when female voices dominated a church service or committee. Now expecting my first child I find, somewhat reluctantly, I am considered pioneering – in 2004! There are times when I feel like the women’s movement has saved by faith, and other times when I feel like it struggles to keep up with my life. There are times when the church is my refuge and inspiration and times when it is both frustrating and disappointing. Yet, to be and work in it is a calling I am unable to dismiss, and so I am constantly asking, “where is God in the changing realities of the women’s movement, the life of this woman, and the lives of the women of the church?”

Darren

I discovered some of the writing of the Men’s Movement while training as a pastor. It was just before my partner Jenni and I had our first child. Writers like Steve Biddulph encouraged involved fathering and negotiating mutual work and home roles. As a husband and father, I wanted to provide for my family financially and also with loving nurture, and to share both of these roles with Jenni.

As a partner to Jenni, father to two daughters Jessie and Emily, and friend of other women, I have sympathy for the women’s movement’s call for equal opportunity and mutual relationships. As a father to Benjamin I want to model and inspire a healthy masculinity and a mutual respect for women.

At one stage between work appointments, I suggested to Jenni she go out and be the primary breadwinner, to which Jen replied, “No way, I’ve been waiting ten years for this [staying at home as a Mum].” Jenni claims I would find it difficult to focus on looking after the children and not be distracted by ministry or study projects. (She is right but I maintain the vision!) Jenni and I have job-shared one pastoral appointment (at Shepparton Baptist Church as Interim Pastors) and served overseas together. In our current ministry at I am employed full-time as Pastor but Jenni’s pastoral role in different areas of church life is invaluable. At home Jenni is able to focus full-time on the children while I appreciate the flexibility of my pastoral role that allows me to sometimes work from home, or work different hours and be involved at the kids’ school or look after the children while Jenni is engaged in her ministry. Despite my rhetoric, however, the ongoing juggling act to balance work, home duties and childcare is challenging. I am curious to explore the meaning of masculinity and wonder how to move beyond expectations that bind us up.

Theological background: A Relational God Creates a Relational People

The Christian understanding of humanity proceeds from the belief that all people are created in the image of God. In the Genesis creation narratives, humanity is formed as male and female; created to be in partnership with God and with one another (Genesis 1:26-27). This partnership reflects, from the outset, both the nature of God and the nature of humanity: the Trinitarian God, whose very self exists as mutuality, partnership and difference, forms both the woman and man who each contribute to the fundamental definition of what it means to be human. The partnership between women and men reflects the very life of God, and is apparent from the earliest Hebrew traditions.

Whilst the biblical tradition affirms the creation of two biological sexes by God, the concept of gender has a more ambiguous beginning. Generally understood as a social construction which ascribes particular characteristics to women and others to men,

gender is defined within specific cultural contexts. Many debates have surrounded the links between biology and gender; whilst some argue that certain characteristics, such as aggression or nurturing, are inextricably linked with physiological sex, others assert that the associations of these characteristics with either women or men is entirely, or at least significantly, cultural in origin. Given that no-one is able to evacuate their culture, or divorce themselves from their upbringing, it is impossible to isolate the 'nature' from the 'nurture' in sex and gender. However, the enormous variety of human experiences and cultures and the apparent diversity of personalities of men and women suggest that an acknowledgment of the uniqueness of each person is more helpful than assumptions about what it is to be feminine or masculine. Whilst, in our society, certain characteristics are considered more likely to be demonstrated by a man than a woman, it must be acknowledged that all people have the capacity to demonstrate the full range of emotions and behaviours. Imposing rigid categories, such as femininity and masculinity, tends to restrict our capacity to revel in our uniqueness as creations of God.

Carl Jung suggests that within all people are personality traits usually considered to be masculine and feminine, and that we are conditioned to suppress one or the other, depending on our gender. So as a man, I (Darren) am encouraged to show masculine traits like logic and competitiveness, but have the potential to unlock traits usually considered to be feminine like nurture and intuitiveness. As a woman, I (Carolyn) am often assumed to bring intuition and a capacity for relationship to a situation, but am greeted with surprise when I demonstrate ambitious, leadership and competition.

Michael Frost in *Longing for Love* comments that since we are reflections of the God who made us, God too must exhibit characteristics that are both masculine and feminine. To the detriment of the church's wholeness, the latter has traditionally been suppressed. Not only do we hear "Father God, we just pray ..." more often than prayers that praise God's feminine side, but we have predominately heard about a God who is competitive, aggressive and all-powerful and who desires to own, enter and love us. That is not heretical. It is biblical but hardly the whole story. God is also a relational God who nurtures and comforts, and who desires to enfold as much as to enter us.

We say bring on the gender movements and their calls for a reappraisal of our approach to gender roles, in church and society. Who knows, we might be surprised by a 'sexing up' of God-talk and gender relations that will revitalise our worship and how we live out our faith in family life and in the marketplace.

The Women's Movement across generations

The 'first-wave' of the women's movement, epitomised in the public imagination by the dignified protests of the suffragettes, temperance associations and movements to achieve basic rights for women, emerged during the 18th century, when the economic and social position of European women was in decline. Having previously contributed to the household economy, along with men, by engaging in productive and income-generating home-based work, women were largely left behind when the industrial revolution saw labour removed from the home and into public workplaces. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* articulated the increasing frustration of women, in particular the married, bourgeois women, who found themselves isolated, disempowered and devalued. A century later the women's movement continued to assert the right of women to work both inside and outside the

home, and argued for the right of women to receive similar education and be treated equally under the law.

During the twentieth century the women's movement has been a multi-faceted and largely successful movement achieving a raft of legislative and cultural changes which support both the equality of women and men, in terms of equal pay and other rights, and the unique needs of women, relating to child-bearing, maternity leave, health issues and freedom. Despite the caricatures which reduce the movement to images of bra-burning and which perpetuate false assumptions about women's attitudes to men or family, the women's movement of recent decades has been diverse, broadly inclusive and, often, self-critical. As in any well-developed movement, including Christianity, numerous different and even opposing schools of thought have emerged. Today, liberal, Marxist, postmodern and psychoanalytic feminists debate each other while 'post-feminists' and many other women have taken a 'don't associate me with the 'f' word' stance, have actually incorporated much of the what the women's movement has stood for and fought for, into their assumptions and practices.

In recent times, many of the major debates of the women's movement have moved out of the spheres of academia and activism and into the broadsheet opinion pages, other mainstream media and the realm of dinner party conversation. Recent exchanges in *The Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* have brought to the fore the inter-generational debates concerning motherhood, the balance (or imbalance) between career and family aspirations, maternity leave and childcare. Headlines like "Has Feminism Let Us Down?" and "Careers Can Wait but Biology Can't" have been placed alongside "Why Feminism Is Still Relevant" in a series of exchanges concerning the old and basic stuff of the women's movement and women's lives: work, family, motherhood and equality. To me, such debates are the hallmark of a healthy and vigorous movement. As in the church, political parties and trade unions, each generation seeks to have its unique voice heard, to critique the contributions of previous generations and to relate the ideologies of the past to the concerns of the day. And so, as the women of the postmodern generation revel in the achievements of the women's movement of yesterday (often without noticing it) they also point out its shortcomings. While some of us are realising that the superwoman outfit doesn't fit well during pregnancy (nor after it in some cases), others are delighting in the challenge of juggling paid work, child-rearing and full, public lives. Others are wishing that someone had told them that climbing the career ladder was tiring and prone to inspiring moments of vertigo. Meanwhile, many women and men are just delighted that a whole range of life choices concerning family, career, leisure, volunteerism, faith, spirituality and community are now considered valid and worthy of exploration.

Meanwhile, within the church and other communities of faith, these debates, the women's movement and the consciousness of the community also continues developing and is variously located alongside, well behind and, just occasionally, in the lead of the rest of society. Just as the insights of the women's movement are important for church and faith, the contributions of feminist theology have much to offer the broader women's movement. Because of their basis in a theology of relationality and their recognition of the complexity of the human condition, Christian feminists have long explored the holistic nature of a full human life, considering faith, spirituality, community, family, vocation, politics and tradition within their explorations of women's lives and faith journeys. In this respect, aspects of the

Christian discourse on women, gender and lifestyle have much to contribute to the broader gender movements. Regrettably, in other areas, the Christian church lags sadly behind the public debate and public standard. In some instances, the right of women to basic types of participation, opportunities to voice their unique concerns and to use and develop their gifts and abilities are still being debated, ignored or opposed. Given the assumptions of broader society, and the level of debate in the public discourse this, regrettably, renders the voice of some parts of the church irrelevant, or even damaging.

The Men's Movement for a new generation

By its nature, the women's movement was designed to bring liberation for women. The Women's Movement helped women participate in public roles and only hinted at the restrictions gender roles place on men. In the context of discrimination against women, it may have seemed ludicrous to suggest men needed liberation, but men are also affected negatively by patriarchal gender relations.

The Men's Movement has followed the Women's Movement and became popular in the 1980s' and especially the 90s' in helping men reflect on their own position. The Women's Movement argued women can do what men do (in public roles). Parts of the Men's Movement contended that men can do what women do (in private roles) and take responsibility for domestic duties and nurturing children, while sharing the privileges of public life. Like women in previous decades, men expressed their dissatisfaction with fixed roles and their longing for a healthy, non-oppressive, life-affirming approach to gender.

Like the militant caricatures of the women's movement, it is easy to think of angry blackshirt fathers in custody battles or jungle retreats for 'secret men's business' whenever the Men's Movement is mentioned. However, the collective exploration of men and masculinity of the Men's Movement is broader than any one approach. It is not yet as developed as a 'movement' as the women's movement, but is an emerging collection of thinking and writing about men's identity and experience.

There is a Men's Movement in Darren's church every year as men and boys go camping together. It started three years ago as a fathers and sons camping weekend at Lorne, and broadened over the last two years as a camp in Blackwood for any men and boys. We bring our own food and share it together. Some of the boys play with water pistols, some of the men drink port at night, and most of us play football. It's not a formalised retreat but a chance to get away and enjoy one another's friendships and time together. There are few rituals or regular events, though each year we share highlights of the weekend and go for a long bushwalk.

Darren's camp may seem far from the picture painted by Robert Bly's *Iron John*, which has come to typify the movement and its mythopoetic branch. Yet such camps address the same needs. Bly believes masculinity is in crisis because modern men have lost connection with the 'wild man' but can seek a new self-understanding in an emotionally engaging and mentored life-journey. Bly's expressive approach is appealing to some men, but others find him too abstract and argue he perpetuates negative aspects of masculinity. The Wild Man imagery seems to reinforce traditional gender roles. A man of *iron* is hardly a metaphor for flexibility, liberation and new directions. Boys on our boys camp as well as grown-up men who are husbands and fathers need more than such a model of rugged individualism.

Promise Keepers, the most famous movement of Christian men reasserting their manhood, is an ecumenical group originating in America which gathers men together

often in stadium-sized events or smaller accountability groups and congregational seminars. They encourage men to be responsible to family, church and community, and to rekindle Christian commitments. Promise Keepers are addressing issues of identity, meaning, fatherlessness and responsibility. There is a valid concern, however, that Promise Keepers is reasserting patriarchy in encouraging men to take charge of their families. They assume patriarchy is God-sanctioned and that many of the problems in families and society today are due to a lack of men's leadership (read dominance). This is clearly very damaging to both women and families. As one woman said, "they require women to give up way too much just to get an attentive husband and father – something they deserved anyway!"

What men need is not drum-beating jungle trips or crusades urging men to "take charge". More helpful, we think, are writers on masculinity who articulate men's yearning for emotional intimacy with other men and for genuine mutuality with women. An accessible Australian author who points in some helpful directions is Steve Biddulph. In his seminal book *Manhood: An action plan for changing men's lives*, he upholds a vision for real male friendships, mutual marriages, active parenting, wholesome sex and heartfelt work. Men in the future, he predicts hopefully, will "Work less, play more. Earn less, spend less. Parent more, stay married longer. Live longer. Be safer to be around."

The men's movement is still emerging, and Christian authors are only beginning to explore related issues of men's sexuality, spirituality and vocation. How this discourse develops in the church and in dialogue with the women's movement remains to be seen. After two centuries of the women's movement and two decades of the men's movement, how can God, women and men talk together?

Three way conversation: How can God, Women and Men talk together?

The Women's and Men's Movements have invited women and men to explore areas that were previously ascribed to the other gender. But this new found freedom has also, for some, brought new pressures on time and raised new issues of how to achieve a balance between the different facets of life. Where women have had increased opportunities in the public sphere they have tended to continue working 'the second shift' at home. Conversely, the current generation of men have had few role models in their attempts to maintain their public roles whilst exploring the possibilities of increased involvement in domestic tasks, child-rearing and relational modes of operating. This compounding of traditional social roles with additional roles in the private sphere is a point of tension and an added burden for many men. One of the ongoing tasks of contemporary gender movements is an ongoing and mutual dialogue between men and women in negotiating appropriate, achievable and healthy vocational goals with an appropriate balance of employment and family responsibilities. Many women and men are realising we cannot be nurturing parents, involved community volunteers and full-time workers all at once. Whilst some might view this movement as a scaling down of ambitions and expectations, others might assert that this reassessment of priorities is, indeed, the opposite; that is, a manifestation of greater ambitions and expectations, with holism, balance and health at the centre. Perhaps these might be considered a 'sexed up' set of ambitions and expectations.

We suspect the ongoing conversation about gender-relations will include negotiating an appropriate balance of roles, advocating for supportive government policy, and articulating a theology of vocation that includes employment and family (productive

and reproductive work). Through these explorations, and a 'sexing up' of our theology, we hope that it is a sense of created and celebrated human uniqueness, rather than fixed or stereotypical gender categories, which is affirmed.

In our view, Christian communities have the potential to be places which maximise the experience of human freedom and minimise constrictive and damaging cultural forces, including limiting gender stereotypes, which have restricted the celebration and acknowledgement of the full range of human behaviours, gifts and attributes created by God. Although some churches continue to be restricted by a limiting theological heritage, we have been inspired by a poem by Chuck Lathrop, that articulates a vision of a communal, co-operative and non-hierarchical model of church utilising the metaphor of a round table. This metaphor has been taken as a starting point for many emerging models of Christian community, including Letty Russell's *Church in the Round*. It offers a vision of partnership and mutuality within the church which is reflective of the encircling love of the Trinity, and affirms the giftedness and contribution of different members of the community.

In Search of a Round Table

Concerning the why and how and what and
who of ministry,

One image keeps surfacing:

A table that is round.

It will take some sawing

to be roundtabled,

some redefining, some redesigning.

Some redoing and rebirthing

of narrowlong churching

can be painful for people and tables.

It would mean no daising and throning,

for but one king is there,

and he was a footwisher, at table no less.

And what of narrowlong ministers

when they confront a roundtable people,

after years of working up the table

to finally sit at its head, only to discover

that the table has been turned round?

They must be loved into roundness,

for God has called a people,

not 'them and us'.

'Them and us' are unable to gather round

for at a roundtable, there are no sides,

and all are invited

to wholeness and to food.

At one time

our narrowlong churches

were built to resemble the cross;

but it does not good for buildings to do so,

if lives do not.

Roundtabling means no preferred seating,

no first and last, no better and no corners

for the “least of these”.
Roundtabling means
being with, a part of,
together, and one.
It means room for the Spirit
and gifts
and disturbing profound peace for all.
We can no longer prepare for the past.
We will and must and are called to be church,
and if God calls for other than
roundtable
we are bound to follow.
Leaving the sawdust
and chips, designs and redesigns behind
in search of and in the presence of the
kingdom
that is God’s and not ours.
Amen.
Chuck Lathrop

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Darren Cronshaw is pastor at Aberfeldie Baptist Church, a member of The Community of Hope, and teaches mission studies at Bible College of Victoria and Whitley College. Darren is married to Jenni Cronshaw, a midwife and pastor by background but currently a stay-at-home Mum. They share the privilege of parenting a son Benjamin (who has just started school) and two daughters Jessie (who has just started kindergarten) and Emily (who has just started saying “Dad-dy”).