The Essence of Femininity A Personal Perspective

Feminists are dedicated to the proposition that the difference between men and women is a matter of mere biology. The rest of us recognize a far deeper reality, one that meets us on an altogether different plane from mere anatomical distinctions. It is unfathomable and indefinable, yet men and women have tried ceaselessly to fathom and define it. It is unavoidable and undeniable, yet in the past couple of decades earnest and high-sounding efforts have been made in the name of decency, equality, and fairness, at least to avoid it and, whenever possible, to deny it. I refer, of course, to femininity-a reality of God's design and God's making, His gift to me and to every woman-and, in a very different way, His gift to men as well. If we really understood what femininity is all about, perhaps the question of roles would take care of itself.

What I have to say is not validated by my having a graduate degree or a position on the faculty or administration of an institution of higher learning. It comes not from any set of personal tastes and preferences. It is not a deduction from my own genetic leanings or temperament. Instead, it is what I see as the arrangement of the universe and the full harmony and tone of Scripture. This arrangement is a glorious hierarchical order of graduated splendor, beginning with the Trinity, descending through seraphim, cherubim, archangels, angels, men, and all lesser creatures, a mighty universal dance, choreographed for the perfection and fulfillment of each participant.

For years I have watched with growing dismay, even anguish, what has been happening in our society, in our educational system, in our churches, in our homes, and on the deepest level of personality, as a result of a movement called feminism, a movement that gives a great deal of consideration to something called personhood but very little to womanhood, and hardly a nod to femininity. Words like *manhood* and *masculinity* have been expunged from our vocabulary, and we have been told in no uncertain terms that we ought to forget about such things, which amount to nothing more than biology, and concentrate on what it means to be "persons."

Throughout the millennia of human history, up until the past two decades or so, people took for granted that the differences between men and women were so obvious as to need no comment. They accepted the way things were. But our easy assumptions have been assailed and confused, we have lost our bearings in a fog of rhetoric about something called equality, so that I find myself in the uncomfortable position of having to belabor to educated people what was once perfectly obvious to the simplest peasant.

And here I must make a confession. Almost everything that constitutes an issue in modern American life I view from the vantage point of "peasants" in a Stone-Age culture where I once lived. I'm always asking myself, "What would those people make of all this? Where would I begin to try to explain it to them?" This exotic perspective does, in a way, throw a clearer light on the basics that helps me assess the issues.

For a number of years I lived with jungle Indians of South America who expressed their masculinity and femininity in a variety of ways, never pretended that the differences were negligible, and had no word for role. The femininity of woman was a deep-rooted consciousness of what she was made for. It was expressed in everything she did differently from men, from her hairstyle and clothes (if she wore any) to the way she sat and the work she did. Any child knew

that women wove hammocks and made pots and caught fish with their hands, cleared underbrush, planted crops, and carried by far the heaviest loads, while men chopped down trees and hunted, caught fish with nets and spears, and carried no loads at all if there was a woman around. Nobody had any complaints. These responsibilities were not up for grabs, not interchangeable, not equal. Nobody thought of power or prestige or competition. Nobody talked about roles. This was the way things were.

Once, in the bungling way of foreigners, I "brought down the house," as it were, by picking up a man's eight-foot spear and pretending to be about to hurl it. They died laughing. If they had not taken it as a joke, I would have been in serious trouble. Women had nothing to do with spears. Their power did not lie in being equal with men but in being women. Men were men and women were glad of it. They understood that this was how things were arranged originally, and they liked it that way.

That perspective, among other things, convinced me that this civilized business of "roles" is nearly always, to put it bluntly, a power struggle. Coming back to this country and listening to a good many solemn dialogues on the roles of women in this or that or the other thing, I noticed that "this or that or the other thing" was never anything to do with fishing or farming or writing a book or giving birth to a baby, but always something that touched in some way on questions of authority or power or competition or money rather than on the vastly prior issue of the meaning of sexuality. In politics, in big business, in higher education, feminism is frequently discussed. But femininity? Never. Perhaps it should not surprise us that secular higher education has long since discarded the image of femininity as utterly irrelevant to anything that really matters, but it is calamitous when Christian higher education follows suit. This is what is happening. Shortly before he died, Francis Schaeffer said, "Tell me what the world is saying today, and I'll tell you what the church will be saying seven years from now."

It is my observation-and, I may add, my experience-that Christian higher education, trotting happily along in the train of feminist crusaders, is willing and eager to treat the subject of *feminism*, but gags on the word *femininity*. Maybe it regards the subject as trivial or unworthy of academic inquiry. Maybe the real reason is that its basic premise is feminism. Therefore it simply cannot cope with femininity.

Secular philosophy comes at us daily with terrible force, and we need Paul's admonition to the Roman Christians, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold, but let God re-make you so that your whole attitude of mind is changed" (Romans 12:2, *Phillips*). Feminist philosophy, which sounds reasonable enough on the surface, is a subtle and pervasive poison, infecting the minds of Christians and non-Christians alike. I was amazed to find in *The Intercollegiate Review* (Fall 1987), a secular journal, a sharp critique entitled "The Barbarism of Feminist Scholarship," in which the author, Carol Iononne, laid bare its political motivation, suppression of data in the service of feminist politics, special pleading, and built-in contradictions.

The author cited the suit brought by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission against Sears, Roebuck and Company, the largest employer of women in the country, charging discrimination against women because of the higher number of men promoted to commission

sales. After eleven years of compiling evidence for their case, the EEOC found not one witness to testify that she had personally been the victim of discrimination. For the first time in the history of this kind of suit, Sears chose to fight back, countering that not enough women could be found willing to take the commission jobs, and that therefore factors other than discrimination must be the explanation. Trying to find an expert in women's history, they were turned down by one woman who declared that she would never testify against the EEOC and one man who refused out of fear of losing his feminist credentials. Only one woman, Rosalind Rosenberg of Barnard College, agreed to testify.

Rosenberg argued on the basis of the historical record: women and men have different interests, goals, and aspirations. Women are not quite so interested as men are, for example, in tires, furnaces, and aluminum siding. Rosenberg was vilified not because of the *content* of her testimony, but because she testified at all. This was an "immoral act," and she was called a traitor.

That any sensible person would find it necessary to argue in court that men and women have different interests only shows how far we have slid into absurdities. To speak even of scientifically verified differences in the structure of male and female brains, or endocrinological differences that affect the social behavior of men and women, is to risk charges of sexism, chauvinism, stupidity, or, as in Dr. Rosenberg's case, immorality.

The feminist theology of Christians (I cannot call it "Christian feminist theology") is a Procrustean bed on which doctrine and the plain facts of human nature and history, not to mention the Bible itself, are arbitrarily stretched or chopped off to fit. Why, I ask, does feminist theology start with the answers? One who spoke on "A Biblical Approach to Feminism" defined her task (a formidable one, I should say!) as the attempt to interpret the Bible in a fashion favorable to the cause of equality (Virginia Ramey Mollenkott at the Evangelical Women's Caucus, Washington, D.C., November 1975). The "interpretation" called for amounts to a thorough revision of the doctrines of creation, man, Trinity, and the inspiration of Scripture, and a reconstruction of religious history, with the intent of purging each of these of what is called a patriarchal conspiracy against women. Why must feminists substitute for the glorious hierarchical vision of blessedness a ramshackle and incoherent ideal that flattens all human beings to a single level-a faceless, colorless, sexless wasteland where rule and submission are regarded as a curse, where the roles of men and women are treated like machine parts that are interchangeable, replaceable, and adjustable, and where fulfillment is a matter of pure politics, things like equality and rights?

This is a world that the poets have never aspired to, the literature of the ages has somehow missed, a world that takes no account of mystery. The church claims to be the bearer of revelation. If her claim is true, as C. S. Lewis points out, we should expect to find in the church "an element that unbelievers will call irrational and believers will call supra-rational. There ought to be something in it opaque to our reason though not contrary to it… . If we abandon that, if we retain only what can be justified by standards of prudence and convenience at the bar of enlightened common sense, then we exchange revelation for that old wraith Natural Religion."[1]

Christian vision springs from mystery. Every major tenet of our creed is a mystery-*revealed*, not explained-affirmed and apprehended only by the faculty we call faith. Sexuality is a mystery representing the deepest mystery we know anything about: the relationship of Christ and His church. When we deal with masculinity and femininity we are dealing with the "live and awful shadows of realities utterly beyond our control and largely beyond our direct knowledge," as Lewis puts it.[2] We cannot at the same time swallow the feminist doctrine that femininity is a mere matter of cultural conditioning, of stereotypes perpetuated by tradition, or even the product of some nefarious plot hatched by males in some prehistoric committee meeting.

Please do not misunderstand me. We must and we do deplore the stereotypes that caricature the divine distinctions. We deplore the abuses perpetrated by men against women-and, let us not forget, by women against men, for all have sinned-but have we forgotten the archetypes?

Stereotype is a word generally used disparagingly to denote a fixed or conventional notion or pattern. An archetype is the original pattern or model, embodying the essence of things and reflecting in some way the internal structure of the world. I am not here to defend stereotypes of femininity, but to try to focus on the Original Pattern.

The first woman was made specifically for the first man, a helper, to meet, respond to, surrender to, and complement him. God made her *from* the man, out of his very bone, and then He brought her to the man. When Adam named Eve, he accepted responsibility to "husband" her-to provide for her, to cherish her, to protect her. These two people together represent the image of God-one of them in a special way the initiator, the other the responder. Neither the one nor the other was adequate alone to bear the divine image.

God put these two in a perfect place and-you know the rest of the story. They rejected their humanity and used their God-bestowed freedom to defy Him, decided they'd rather not be a mere man and woman, but gods, arrogating to themselves the knowledge of good and evil, a burden too heavy for human beings to bear. Eve, in her refusal to accept the will of God, refused her femininity. Adam, in his capitulation to her suggestion, abdicated his masculine responsibility for her. It was the first instance of what we would recognize now as "role reversal." This defiant disobedience ruined the original pattern and things have been in an awful mess ever since.

But God did not abandon His self-willed creatures. In His inexorable love He demonstrated exactly what He had had in mind by calling Himself a Bridegroom-the Initiator, Protector, Provider, Lover-and Israel His bride, His beloved. He rescued her, called her by name, wooed and won her, grieved when she went whoring after other gods. In the New Testament we find the mystery of marriage again expressing the inexpressible relationship between the Lord and His people, the husband standing for Christ in his headship, the wife standing for the church in her submission. This Spirit-inspired imagery is not to be shuffled about and rearranged according to our whims and preferences. Mystery must be handled not only with care but also with reverence and awe.

The gospel story begins with the Mystery of Charity. A young woman is visited by an angel, given a stunning piece of news about becoming the mother of the Son of God. Unlike Eve,

whose response to God was calculating and self-serving, the virgin Mary's answer holds no hesitation about risks or losses or the interruption of her own plans. It is an utter and unconditional self-giving: "I am the Lord's servant… . May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38). This is what I understand to be the essence of femininity. It means surrender.[3]

Think of a bride. She surrenders her independence, her name, her destiny, her will, herself to the bridegroom in marriage. This is a public ceremony, before God and witnesses. Then, in the marriage chamber, she surrenders her body, her priceless gift of virginity, all that has been hidden. As a mother she makes a new surrender-it is her life for the life of the child. This is most profoundly what women were made for, married or single (and the special vocation of the virgin is to surrender herself for service to her Lord and for the life of the world).

The gentle and quiet spirit of which Peter speaks, calling it "of great worth in God's sight" (1 Peter 3:4), is the true femininity, which found its epitome in Mary, the willingness to be only a vessel, hidden, unknown, except as Somebody's mother. This is the true mother-spirit, true maternity, so absent, it seems to me, in all the annals of feminism. "The holier a woman is," wrote Leon Bloy, "the more she is a woman."

Femininity *receives*. It says, "May it be to me as you have said." It takes what God gives-a special place, a special honor, a special function and glory, different from that of masculinity, meant to be a help. In other words, it is for us women to receive the given as Mary did, not to insist on the not-given, as Eve did.

Perhaps the exceptional women in history have been given a special gift-a *charism*-because they made themselves nothing. I think of Amy Carmichael, for example, another Mary, because she had no ambition for anything but the will of God. Therefore her obedience, her "May it be to me," has had an incalculably deep impact in the twentieth century. She was *given* power, as was her Master, because she made herself nothing.

I would be the last to deny that women are given gifts that they are meant to exercise. But we must not be greedy in insisting on having all of them, in usurping the place of men. We are women, and my plea is *Let me be a woman*, holy through and through, asking for nothing but what God wants to give me, receiving with both hands and with all my heart whatever that is. No arguments would ever be needed if we all shared the spirit of the "most blessed among women."

The world looks for happiness through self-assertion. The Christian knows that joy is found in self-abandonment. "If a man will let himself be lost for My sake," Jesus said, "he will find his true self." A Christian woman's true freedom lies on the other side of a very small gate-humble obedience-but that gate leads out into a largeness of life undreamed of by the liberators of the world, to a place where the God-given differentiation between the sexes is not obfuscated but celebrated, where our inequalities are seen as essential to the image of God, for it is in male and female, in male as male and female as female, not as two identical and interchangeable halves, that the image is manifested.

To gloss over these profundities is to deprive women of the central answer to the cry of their hearts, "Who am I?" No one but the Author of the Story can answer that cry.

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[1] C. S. Lewis, "Priestesses in the Church?" in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 238.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 239.

[3] I do not want to be understood as recommending a woman's surrender to evils such as coercion or violent conquest.