In the past few years, the Western church has seen an explosion in the number of resources designed to help us discover and embrace our God-given gender identities. Books and conferences tell us how to model biblical masculinity and femininity. More to the point, many seek to help us identify the male or female behaviors that God designed to flow from our sex differences. Numerous lists have been created with accompanying proof-texts to help believers pursue gender health. Consider these qualities of the perfect woman:

She’ll do the Father’s work; not seek her own success/desires; be filled with the Spirit; walk in God’s ways; share the gospel; focus on eternal pursuits; live a life of holiness and obedience; turn from sin; walk in love; seek to meet others’ needs; be others-focused; sacrifice her desires for others; be unselfish, gentle and courageous; have confidence, and zeal; not be wishy-washy or afraid; lead God’s disciples; not be a follower when she shouldn’t be; show initiative when appropriate instead of waiting on someone else to do right; confront when necessary; not be a people-pleaser; be decisive according to God’s revealed will; fulfill commitments; be a worker, not lazy or a quitter; be humble; serve and listen to others in Christian leadership; not lord it over others; glorify another—the Father; not be greedy for recognition.

Okay, I confess. I borrowed this list from a blog post containing a "chart of Christ-like character qualities" that will “help explain authentic manhood more specifically” (“Profiling Christian Masculinity,” at cbmw.org). I merely changed the “he” to “she.” Clearly, none of the qualities listed is exclusive to males or females.

Christians are fairly unified in our belief that God made men and women different by design. Both egalitarians and complementarians believe in gender differences. Where the splintering occurs is in determining exactly how biological differences determine the social behaviors we should exemplify to become our true selves. As soon as we assign categories (“men lead,” “women serve”) we create boxes that confine us in ways God did not intend.

The Son of Man and Our Definition of “Manly”

Probably the most-quoted definition of masculinity in this conversation comes from Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: “At the heart of mature masculinity is a sense of benevolent responsibility to lead, provide for, and protect women in ways appropriate to a man’s differing relationships” (p. 35). And
on initial reflection, Jesus does seem to fit this definition. While on earth, he led Mary of Bethany in a theology lesson as she sat at his feet. And since the definition includes protection of women, we also note that Jesus, the world’s first recorded rabbi to engage a female student, protected Mary from criticism when she made theology a higher priority than cooking.

So Jesus led women and he protected women. But did he provide financially for them? Luke seems to suggest he did not: “Some time afterward [Jesus] went on through towns and villages, preaching and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and disabilities: Mary (called Magdalene), from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna the wife of Chuza (Herod’s household manager), Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their own resources” (8:1–3, emphasis mine. All Scripture quotations taken from the NET Bible).

Jesus received the financial support of women. His very subsistence depended on females. So apparently receiving the financial support of women does not undermine manhood. And conversely, apparently a woman’s femininity is not violated if she financially supports a man or men. Wisdom herself, personified as an upper-class woman in Proverbs 31, is shown to be generating income for her husband and children by dealing in fields and belts.

Usually next to the “ideal” of males providing, we find 1 Timothy 5:8 listed as a proof-text. In Paul’s epistle to Timothy, he speaks of caring for widows, and in doing so, he uses no male pronouns: “If someone does not provide for one’s own that one is worse than an unbeliever.” And in fact, eight verses later his statement is more sex-specific, but not in the way that has been emphasized: “If a believing woman has widows in her family, let her help them. The church should not be burdened” (v. 16, emphasis mine).

If we’re honest, we must concede that the Bible gives no definition of uniquely masculine or feminine behavior other than references against cross-dressing. What we conclude about gender-specific norms in the Bible comes from picking and choosing a set of passages and creating our own definitions. But what if we noticed only that Jacob cooked stew, Jesus cooked fish in his post-resurrection state, and the deacons served tables for widows? We might conclude that cooking and serving tables is truly masculine work, or at least that such actions have a “masculine feel,” especially when we see Jesus’s rebuke of Martha for being too cooking-focused.

In a world in which real men didn’t cry, Jesus wept. In a world in which masculine men didn’t characterize themselves as women, Jesus compared himself to a hen, and his Father to a woman who lost a coin.

In a weapon-wielding world, Jesus told Peter his sword was out of place.

If we step back and look at our Lord, we see that he himself is a misfit with the most-quoted definition of “biblical masculinity.” And he was a misfit for the Greco-Roman world’s definition, too.

The Son of Man and Rome’s Definition of “Manly”

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Roman Sexualities, a collection of essays published by Princeton Press, offers a major contribution to our understanding of sexuality in the Mediterranean world in Jesus’ time. And in it we find an explanation for why gladiator, actor, and prostitute were considered dishonorable professions. People engaged in these occupations had their bodies subjected to public observation. And in that culture, enduring such scrutiny was dishonorable. A real man had complete agency over his body.

We also learn that the honor/status-driven culture of the Roman Empire defined a truly masculine man in part by his class, the sign of which he wore on his garments. And class was broader than economic status, carrying with it bodily rights. A Roman male’s masculine power came from having the freedom to say, “You must leave my body alone.”

Knowing this, we can better appreciate that from a Greco-Roman perspective Jesus willingly gave up his man-card for us. In his value system, love trumped gender roles. Indeed, Jesus let his “masculinity” be violated for the glory of God. He voluntarily endured the humiliation of nakedness,