Throughout history why did the church frequently use feminine language for God? In what way did this feminine language serve the church? Why do we evangelicals, in contrast, appear so uncomfortable with feminine imagery for God?

To examine the church’s historical use of feminine metaphors for God concerns the realm of historical theology, and as such I will not explore the biblical material upon which the historical writers based their work. Moreover, by offering examples of how the church throughout its history engaged feminine imagery for God, however uncomfortable and unusual it may seem for us today, it is not my purpose here to advocate for feminine language for God. My present concern, rather, is to observe how feminine language for God assisted the church as it was challenged by various theological concerns over the years.

The breadth of this topic is enormous, and therefore this review is a mere airplane ride over the terrain, and a Concord flight at that. We will have time only to touch upon the highest peaks of this fascinating mountain range.

As evangelicals, our tendency to avoid feminine language may be understandable in light of the current radical feminist literature on language for God. By radical feminist, I refer to those who place their feminist commitments above their commitment to the authority and inspiration of scripture. These feminists often object to masculine language for God because, in their opinion, language shapes or creates reality. For example, Neil Gillman, a Jewish feminist, suggested that the “language we use reflects and in turn shapes the way we construct our experience of the world.”

According to Judith Plaskow of Yale University, “once images become socially, politically, or morally inadequate ... they are also religiously inadequate. Instead of pointing to and evoking the reality of God, they block the possibility of religious experience.” Hence we are not surprised to observe some within the radical feminist movement modifying the male language for God that they find offensive. In Distorting Scripture? The Challenges of Bible Translation and Gender Accuracy, Mark Strauss documents feminist versions of the Bible that alter masculine terms and pronouns in relation to language about God and Jesus Christ. For radical feminists, these alterations are viewed as a corrective to the historical oppression of women.

Such feminists object to a religious system that for them renders “male” as pre-eminent as evidenced in male-dominant language for God that is exclusive, literal, and patriarchal. However, throughout the history of the church we find there were theologians and reformers, crafters of councils and creeds, from the Patristic period through the Modern Era, all of whom worked within a patriarchal culture and yet used feminine imagery for God. By doing so, they brought theological understanding of God, which is not male in an exclusive, literal, or patriarchal sense.

Why did these theologians use feminine language for God? While the theological challenges of each generation were different, feminine God-language was often a useful tool whereby the church was able to understand God’s immanence. By contrast, and as might be expected, mascu-
line images for God were ways of noting God’s transcendence.

To say that God is immanent is to propose that God is close to or dwells within the limits of human experience. The word “immanence” comes from the Latin, *in manere*, which means, “to dwell within.” By contrast, to say God is transcendent is to suggest God is above, apart, or external to creation. Transcendence derives from the Latin, *trans scendar*, which literally means to climb across or to climb over.

As Christians, we believe that God is both immanent as well as transcendent. God is “distinct from, yet at work in the world.” However, throughout history some have exaggerated or placed unmerited emphasis on God’s transcendence, and others have unduly stressed God’s immanence. “The history of the problem of divine immanence and transcendence consists largely in a constant swinging of the theological pendulum from one extreme to the other, seeking for a ‘vital center.’” That vital center, where God’s immanence and transcendence converge, can be found in the person of Christ.

Let us observe, then, how the feminine language for God assisted the early church in articulating God’s immanence in the full humanity and deity of Christ.

The Early Church

“God is spirit.” John 4:24

During the early centuries, the church repeated, with slight variations, several themes. First, that God is spirit; second that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine; and third that Jesus’ salvation is universal. While some in the early church used gendered language for God, they always resisted rendering God a gendered deity. Rather, feminine metaphors were used to suggest that Christ came from the womb of the Father, and that God is not only transcendent but also immanent. Though willing to engage feminine metaphors for God, the early church was clear about one matter: God is not a gendered deity because God is spirit.

Thus in the fourth century, Jerome insisted that God is spirit. Likewise, Ambrose (340-397 AD), Bishop of Milan, understood the person of Jesus as *vir* which designates gender. However, gender is “attributed to human nature but never to the God-head.” Hence the gender of Jesus was not transferred to God.

Ambrose, using the image of womb and breast, emphasized not the gender of God, but the concept that God is a nurturing God. Christ arises from the womb of God thereby suggesting that Jesus is of the same substance as God. Jesus is therefore fully divine. By coming from the womb of Mary, Christ is also fully human. Augustine, Ambrose’s student, also takes up this argument. Ambrose wrote:

The two begettings of the Lord Jesus, that according to the divinity and that according to the flesh, because he was begotten from the Father before all ages … because the Son has proceeded from the most profound and incomprehensible substance of the Father and is always in him. For this reason also the evangelist says, “No one has at any time seen God, except the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has revealed him.” “The bosom of the Father,” then, is to be understood in a spiritual sense, as in a kind of innermost dwelling of the Father’s love and of his nature, in which the Son always dwells. Even so, the Father’s womb is the spiritual womb of an inner sanctuary, from which the Son has proceeded.

By using the image of womb and bosom, Ambrose does not transfer gender to God in an ontological way. Rather, these metaphors are used to connote likeness or sameness of Christ to both God and to the human race. Likewise, David Clark suggests God is often imaged as immanent when feminine metaphors are used and as transcendent when masculine images are used. It is interesting, therefore, to note how many within the Patristic period and beyond used both feminine and masculine images for God almost in tandem with each other, as if to say God is both knowable and unknowable. God is immanent or close to us, just as God is transcendent or outside our experiences. Here are a few examples.

Clement of Alexandria (150-215 AD)

God himself is love; and out of love to us became feminine. In his ineffable essence he is father; in his compassion to us he became mother. The father by loving became feminine, and the great proof of
this is he whom he begot of himself; the first fruit brought forth by God is love.14

The Word [Christ] is everything to his little ones, both father and mother.15

**Chrysostom (347-407 AD)**

Thou art my Father, thou art my Mother, thou my Brother, thou art Friend, thou art Servant, thou art House-keeper; thou art the All, and the All is in thee; thou art Being, and there is nothing that is, except thou.16

Here we note Chrysostom and Clement imaging God as both “mother and father” in combination with each other, a tradition that continues throughout church history. Let us also observe the special role feminine metaphors played in connoting God’s immanence, often through Christ.

**Augustine**

Augustine used the image of God as mother to show that God nurses and tenderly cares for the faithful. God’s transcendent wisdom and sustenance is accessible through Christ. Augustine wrote:

> He who has promised us heavenly food has nourished us on milk, having recourse to a mother’s tenderness. For just as a mother, suckling her infant, transfers from her flesh the very same food which otherwise would be unsuited to a babe ... so our Lord, in order to convert his wisdom into milk for our benefit, came to us clothed in flesh. It is the Body of Christ, then, which here says: “And thou shalt nourish me.”17

**Gregory of Nyssa**

Likewise, Gregory of Nyssa engaged feminine imagery to illustrate how God’s transcendence—God’s unknowable essence—is apprehended through Christ. Nyssa wrote:

> The divine power, though exalted far above our nature and inaccessible to all approach, like a tender mother who joins in the inarticulate utterances of her babe, gives to our human nature what it is capable of receiving; and thus in the various manifestations of God to humanity, God both adapts to humanity and speaks in human language.18

John Chrysostom suggested that though human mothers may relinquish the nurture of their children to servants, God—like a mother—gives birth, nurtures, and personally rears the faithful. He writes:

> There are often mothers that after the travail of birth send out their children to other women as nurses; but he endureth not to do this, but himself feeds us with his own blood, and by all means entwines us with himself ... With each one of the faithful doth he mingle himself in the mysteries, and whom he begat, he nourishes by himself... Let us not then be remiss, having been counted worthy of so much both of love and honor. See ye not the infants with how much eagerness they lay hold of the breast? ... With the like let us also approach this table ... as infants at the breast, draw out the grace of the spirit, let it be our one sorrow, not to partake of this food.19

Did the early church leaders absolutize feminine metaphors for God? No. In the same way they did not absolutize the gender of Christ. Rather, they wished to see his sacrifice as universal—as available to both men and women. By taking on human flesh, Christ bore the sins of

> “As when the hen concerned for her brood gathers her chickens under her wings at the instant of danger, covering them completely and ready to give her life rather than deprive them of this shelter which makes it impossible for the enemy’s eye to discover them—precisely thus does he hide thy sin. Precisely thus: For he too is concerned, infinitely concerned in love, ready to give his life rather than deprive thee of thy secure shelter under his love.”

> Soren Kierkegaard
all people. To make one aspect of Christ’s humanity pre-eminent (i.e., his gender, class, or race) minimizes the victories Christ won at Calvary. Therefore, the early church sought to advance all that Christ had achieved on the cross. As stated by Gregory of Nazianzus: “To Gar Aprosleptom atherapeuton. What is not assumed is not redeemed.”20 Similarly, Augustine underscored the gospel message that Christ bore the sins of all flesh when he wrote:

[God] has honoured both sexes, at once the male and the female, and has made it plain that not only that sex which he assumed pertains to God’s care, but also that sex by which he did assume this other, in that he bore [the nature of] of the man [virum gerendo], [and] in that he was born of the woman.21

According to Patristic thinkers, Christ was male in order to represent men at the Cross. Christ was also born of woman so that Christ might also represent women at Calvary. The early church resisted making Christ’s gender pre-eminent for fear that this might be transferred on to God. Why would the church seek to avoid this? The early Christians were surrounded by a Greek religious system that worshiped pagan, gendered deities. However, the Judeo-Christian God is spirit.22

The Patristic writers engaged feminine imagery, such as womb and breast to teach that Christ is of the same substance as God. Christ was also born of a woman’s womb, and is therefore of the same substance as humankind. As the Council of Toledo stated in the seventh century, “We must believe that the Son came from the womb of the Father (de utero patris).” Womb was understood metaphorically, to suggest that Christ is fully divine, and born of a woman to suggest Christ is fully human. Christ was also male, to represent men, and born of a woman to represent woman, and so all humanity is represented or assumed in Christ. Christ’s sacrifice was therefore seen as universal—or available to everyone.

Feminine imagery was also used during the Patristic Period to indicate the immanence or the nearness of God to humanity. These gendered metaphors functioned as metaphors and thus had limited points of meaning or contact. They were not construed as absolute or as transferring gender to God. Hence, gendered imagery functioned in a analogical sense.

The Middle Ages

Compared to the early church period, which was rich in its use of feminine imagery for God, the medieval theologians use fewer feminine metaphors for God. Perhaps the most important work on this topic is Carolyn Bynum’s book, Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages.23 As the title suggests, the predominant feminine metaphor for God during this period is that of mother.

In order to emphasize the tender, immanent forgiveness of God, Bernard of Clairvaux used the mother motif. Bernard wrote:

Do not let the roughness of our life frighten your tender years. If you feel the stings of temptation ... suck not so much the wounds as the breasts of the Crucified. He will be your mother, and you will be his son.24

Julian of Norwich, perhaps the most profound British spiritual theologian, described God as both father and mother. Julian used the “Jesus as mother” motif to emphasize God's Trinitarian love. As Christ gives birth to a new race, Christ makes known the will of the Father, which is also confirmed by the Holy Spirit. God’s transcendent love becomes immanently known through Christ. Julian writes:

As truly as God is our Father, so is truly God our Mother. Our Father wills, our Mother works, our good Lord the Holy Spirit confirms ... And so Jesus is our true Mother in nature by our first creation, and he is our true Mother in grace by taking our

“Christ arises from the womb of the God thereby suggesting that Jesus is of the same substance as God. Jesus is therefore fully divine. By coming from the womb of Mary, Christ is also fully human.”
created nature. God Almighty is our loving Father, and God all wisdom is our loving Mother, with the love and goodness of the Holy Spirit.25

Likewise, Teresa of Avila used feminine images to connote God’s immanence, nurture, and comfort. She wrote: “For from those divine breasts where it seems God is always sustaining the soul, there flow streams of milk bringing comfort to all the people.”26 Teresa restored the Carmelites to their roots of simplicity and holiness as part of the Counter Reformation, and by doing so she is recognized as an able church reformer. Having faced many challenges in her life, Teresa must have known intimately God's sustaining presence, and communicated this through feminine God-language.

Anselm, who developed the ontological argument, also imaged Christ as mother. Christ not only gives birth to the church, but also as a tender mother Christ loves and rears us. Note how Anselm engages all the senses to connote God’s nurture. He wrote:

And you, Jesus, are you not also a mother? Are you not the mother who, like a hen, gathers her chickens under her wings? ... It is by your death that they have been born, for if you had not been in labour ... and if you had not died, you would not have brought forth ... run under the wings of Jesus your mother and lament your griefs under his feathers ... For by your gentleness the badly frightened are comforted, by your sweet smell the despairing are revived, your warmth gives life to the dead, your touch justifies sinners.27

Though deeply steeped in Aristotelian thought, in which women were misbegotten males,28 even Aquinas refers to Christ as “Our Mother, Wisdom of God.”29

While not nearly as prolific as in the early church, feminine metaphors were clearly part of the theological discourse throughout the church of the Middle Ages. Reformers, theologians, mystics, and monastics employed gendered language, often centered on the motherhood of Christ, rendering the invisible, transcendent, and otherworldliness of God more personal.

The Reformation

A commitment to the centrality of scripture may have inspired the reformers to consider anew the feminine metaphors for God found in scripture. Thus, throughout the Reformation we observe Luther, Calvin, Zinzendorf, and others continuing the tradition of feminine language for God.

Martin Luther’s commentary on Isaiah 46:3 suggested that God has not spoken “more sweetly than in transferring a mother’s experiences to Himself … God cares for us with an everlasting maternal heart and feeling.”30 Commenting on Isaiah 49:15, Luther further highlights God’s immanence in these words: “I will not forsake you, because I am your mother. I cannot desert you.”31 For the reformers such as Luther, God is accessible through scripture, which he imaged as the womb of God.32 Through faith and an encounter with scripture, Luther suggests that we receive “paternal love and thoroughly Maternal Caresses.”33 Luther also said that God was the feminine breast upon which he cast himself in moments of utter exhaustion. Through feminine imagery, therefore, Luther illustrated the tenderness and accessibility of God.

For Calvin, all knowledge of God arises through biblical revelation. Therefore, to create an image of God in material form was contrary to scripture, he argued. Calvin said: “God’s glory is corrupted by an impious falsehood whenever any form is attached to him.”34 Scripture thus prohibits creating graven idol for God “by any visible image.”35

Yet like Luther, Calvin makes use of maternal metaphors for God in Isaiah. Again, the immanence of God is illuminated through the mother motif. Isaiah, Calvin argued, used maternal images to help us understand God’s immanent care and love. God does not rely solely upon paternal images, but “in order to express his very strong affection, [God] chose to liken himself to a mother.”36 God, like a mother (Isaiah 42:14), “expresses astonishing warmth of love and tenderness of affection.”37 God “singularly loves her child, though she brought him forth with extreme pain.”38 Thus God has “manifested himself to be both their father and their mother, [and] will always assist
them.” Calvin suggests that “in no other way than by such figures of speech can his ardent love toward us be expressed.”

Count Zinzendorf (1700-1760 AD) identified the maternal not only in Christ, but also through the Holy Spirit as noted in the following poem.

The Church’s Prayer to the Holy Spirit

Thou, who from the Father hast
'Fore all Time proceeded,
Spirit, by whom the Virgin Blest
The Son here conceived!
Since the Lamb of God, so red,
Is his People’s Brother,
And Christ’s God their Father’s made,
Thou’rt the Church’s Mother.
Of thy Name, O God, and Breath
Grant us still the Nearness!
That the Word of Jesus
Shine to Souls with Clearness.
Whom from Death-Sleep of the Fall
Our dear Lord doth quicken,
Fetch into thy Church-Ark all;
Help their Abba speaking.
As in greatest Things thy Will
Meets with Execution:
So in small shall it fulfil
His Church-Constition.
Of the Righteousness of God
Thro’ the Blood-Effusion,
Of that daily Bread and Food
Thou mak’st Distribution.
MOTHER! all the Church’s Life
Is the Father’s Kindness,
Our Lord’s Patience with his Wife,
And thy rich Forgiveness.
We would fain not tempted be,
With none thus distressed;
Yet if one’s chastis’d by Thee,
It to him be blessed.
And till once the wicked Fiend
Is at God’s Feet lying, (Ps. cx. 1. Heb. ii.8.)
Sleeps within thy Cradle screen’d
The Church from his Trying.
Amen, Ruach Elohim!
Come in th’ Name of Jesus,
Thy Children’s whole Sanhedrim
Rule with Instinct gracious.

Like their orthodox predecessors, key leaders within the Reformation relied upon gendered, metaphoric language to enlarge and render intimate our grasp of God. As the Reformation was a return to a biblical revelation, we there-

“In the same way we stress Christ’s humanity over his gender, it is important to also see the humanity of men and women as pre-eminent to their gender. In this way humankind reflects the Triune God.”

fore observe the reformers engaging biblical feminine metaphors for God found in scripture. By doing so, the reformers enabled God’s revelation to impart knowledge of, and faith in, a loving, personal God.

Modern Church

As we move into the modern era, however, we discover the use of feminine metaphors waning. Hence, the maker of Modern Theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1832), emphasized experiential faith, and therefore avoided using analogical language to describe God. Though Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) had great appreciation for the role of personal experience within faith, he also acknowledged the limitations of language to define God. He writes, “Lo, language as it were bursts and cracks under the strain of expressing God’s greatness in showing mercy.” While Kierkegaard admits to the confines of language, he does use feminine images to illustrate the self-giving of Christ. He writes:

As when the hen concerned for her brood gathers her chickens under her wings at the instant of danger, covering them completely and ready to give her life rather than deprive them of this shelter which makes it impossible for the enemy’s eye to discover them—precisely thus does he hide thy sin. Precisely thus: For he too is concerned, infinitely concerned in love, ready to give his life rather than deprive thee of thy secure shelter under his love.

Paul Tillich (1886-1965 AD) argued that Jesus, as self-sacrificing Logos, transcends gendered images of God. He writes:

Self-sacrifice is not a character of male as male or of female as female, but it is, in the very act of self-sacrifice, the negation of the one or the other in
exclusion. Self-sacrifice breaks the contrast of the sexes, and this is symbolically manifest in the picture of the suffering Christ, in which Christians of both sexes have participated with equal psychological and spiritual intensity.\textsuperscript{44}

Perhaps because many modern theologians assumed that faith was personal and experiential, this in itself replaced the need to use the kinds of feminine metaphors that had been used to connote God’s immanence. What is fascinating however, is the way in which God’s immanence and transcendence are reflected in the person of Christ, as noted by Tillich.

\textbf{Concluding Thoughts}

As we have observed, the use of feminine metaphors for God is clearly part of the church’s tradition, though each era used metaphoric gendered language somewhat differently as they labored to clarify the nature of God.

In general, feminine metaphors tended to function as a means of understanding God’s immanence. Thus, the early church spoke of the womb of God to suggest that Jesus was of the same substance as the Father, again an image of oneness with, or arising from God the Father.

While the church throughout history used gendered metaphors for God, including feminine images, there was a consensus that these images were not used to transfer gender onto God. Rather, it seemed clear that breast, milk, womb, and motherhood motifs used to describe God were metaphors, and therefore have limited points of contact or meaning. To render these metaphors as absolute was to misunderstand them. Thus, the church never ascribed gender to God. Gendered gods were pagan deities.

Though the church used feminine imagery to connote God’s immanence, and masculine imagery to connote God’s transcendence, in the person of Christ God’s immanence and transcendence converge. Jesus’ acts are therefore nurturing and mother-like. Christ is said to give birth to a new race, which He also nurtures and rears. Yet, Christ is also above all things. He is the great iconoclast. Could we not almost say that this shattering is one of the marks of his presence? … And most are offended by the iconoclasm; and blessed are those who are not.\textsuperscript{49}

While the church has used gendered images for God, and though the church has functioned within a patriarchal system, the church has never taught that God is male or female. Gendered metaphors functioned as metaphors. That is, each metaphor possessed an “is,” and an “is not” component.

In our day, however, it seems that gendered metaphors for God have lost the “is not” property. Hence, some have rendered God as fully transcendent, as male, and as unknowable, while others have conceived of God as goddess, as fully immanent and as wholly part of the created order. Yet, two errors accomplish little. We must press forward with a careful awareness that when we use metaphorical language for God we are not creating God in our own image as male or as female. For God is spirit, and Jesus, though male, was human (\textit{anthropos}) theologically, in which both the immanence and transcendence of God are wholly knit together.\textsuperscript{50}

In the same way we stress Christ’s humanity over his gender, it is important to also see the humanity of men and women as pre-eminent to their gender. In this way humankind reflects the Triune God. “The analogy should be clear. In the same way as human is one entity, but two genders, so too God is one God, but three persons.”\textsuperscript{51}
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The author wishes to thank her research assistant, Elizabeth McGrew, for help with the supporting material in this paper.

7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
10. Jerome, Comm. In Isaiah 11 (PL 24.419b). Jerome wrote: In the Gospel of the Hebrews that the Nazarenes read it says, “‘Just now my mother, the Holy Spirit, took me.’ Now no one should be offended by this, because ‘spirit’ in Hebrew is feminine, while in our language (Latin) it is masculine and in Greek it is neuter. In divinity, however, there is no gender.” See http://www.faithfutures.org/JDB/jdb134.html
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid., p. 436.
40. Ibid., p. 302.
48. Augustine, *Sermo* 52. c.6 16 (PL38.360)
49. C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (London: Faber, 1966), p. 52. 50. See Ephesians 1:21-23 “[Christ is] far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” See also Col 1:15-20. NRSV. Aída Besançon Spencer has argued that only a transcendent God can become immanent. See *Goddess Revival*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), p. 139ff.

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