

The Inclusive Incarnation of Augustine's *The Christian Combat*

Theologian Thomas Oden pointedly asks, "Is the Incarnation sexist?"¹ In other words, does Christ's maleness convey a divine gender bias? Is male superiority woven into the very fabric of the Christian story? Classic Christian consensus responds to such questions with a resounding no, but this response is sometimes obscured by the patriarchal context in which the church fathers lived and wrote. Of these, Saint Augustine of Hippo is perhaps the notorious for his complicated views on women,² and he has often been blamed by modern interpreters for the persistent legacy of male superiority in the church and Western thought.³ Though Augustine's views were not unique among the fathers, they remain significant because of his stature as a highly influential Christian philosopher and theologian.⁴

Because the pervasiveness of male superiority within the church is often traced to Augustine's legacy, an attempt to repair misogyny in the church is well-served by a retrieval and re-examination of his views. Some modern theologians are undertaking just such a retrieval, and finding in Augustine a surprising source of early Christian affirmation of women's equal inclusion in God-imagined humanity and equal participation in Christ's redemption.⁵ For example, Kari Børresen writes that although previously "dismayed by Augustine's definition of female subservience as a Godwilled part of the creational order," her assessment has changed. Now,

¹ Thomas Oden, *Classic Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 267.

² For an excellent summary of representative arguments, see Anne Mutter, "Women," in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 887-892.

³ Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 89-90.

⁴ Daly, 84-89; and Michele Schumacher, "Feminist Christologies" in *The Oxford Handbook of Christology*, ed. Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015): 411-412.

⁵ E.g., Kari Elisabeth Børresen, "In Defense of Augustine: How 'Femina' is 'Homo,'" *Augustiniana* 40, no. 1/4 (1990): 411-428; Jane Duran, "A Feminist Appraisal of Augustine," *New Blackfriars* 88, no. 1018 (2007): 665-77; and Schumacher, 408-420.

although she still sees Augustine as working within a flawed hermeneutic of “malecentered conformity,” she also recognizes that his writings “advocate women's human equivalence as strongly as possible within the limits of his patriarchal culture.”⁶

This paper will take up this task of Augustinian retrieval, examining his claims about women in his brief and often-overlooked work *The Christian Combat*. There, Augustine clearly affirms the redemptive significance, agency, and goodness of Mary’s female-sexed body in the Incarnation. This text articulates the inclusion and victory of women in Christ’s redemptive work precisely *because of* their femaleness, not *in spite of* it, a departure from patristic works that merely make theological accommodations for women’s natural inferiority. When examined in the context of Augustine’s broader corpus, *The Christian Combat* reveals “an inclusivist argument embedded in the heart of patristic thinking on the Incarnation,”⁷ one rich in possibility for modern application in a church still reckoning with its views of women.

The Christian Combat: Introduction and Scope

The extreme brevity of *The Christian Combat* merits a broader exploration of its themes as articulated elsewhere in Augustine’s works in order to properly contextualize its claims about women within the scope and purpose of the book. This paper will therefore first explore these themes in depth before examining its arguments about femaleness.

Augustine’s stated purpose for writing *Combat* is to familiarize Christians with their adversary, the devil, and to inspire confident participation in the sure victory of Christ: “In the divine Scriptures we repeatedly read that we are to receive a crown if we emerge victorious. . . . We ought to know, then, who that very adversary is, at whose defeat we are going to receive a crown. It is he whom our Lord first overcame, so that, by abiding in Him, we might be

⁶ Børresen, 411.

⁷ Oden, 266.

victorious.”⁸ Christ’s conquest of the devil is a persistent theme in patristic literature, one that signifies far more than a simplistic battlefield metaphor. Rather, the fathers see Christ’s victory over the devil as a restoration of what was lost at the Fall: the image of God in humanity, the union between God and his creation, and the conquest of the devil’s principalities and powers. This theme of restoration runs throughout the works of Augustine’s substantial corpus, frequently employing metaphors of victory and medicine to demonstrate the breadth of Christ’s accomplishment. For example, this claim from *De Civitate Dei* employs the language of both therapeutic restoration of life and victorious defeat of death.: “For just as the devil through pride led humankind through pride to death, so Christ through humility led humankind back through obedience to life.”⁹

Augustine evokes similar metaphors in *De Doctrina Christiana*, this time leaning more heavily on the therapeutic element of Christ’s restorative work: “We used our immortality so badly as to incur the penalty of death: Christ used His mortality so well as to restore us to life. . . . He came as a . . . mortal to save us who are mortals, by death to save us who were dead.”¹⁰ Christ’s victory over death and the devil is at once his restoration of humanity to life. The Christian life, then, is a call to participation in Christ’s healing victory: “in [Him] we can participate and by participation reach our felicity.”¹¹ This participation, this therapy, this victory is the purpose of Christ’s incarnation: “God himself, the blessed God is is the giver of

⁸ Augustine, *The Christian Combat* 1.

⁹ Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 9.15, quoted in Norman Russell, “The Work of Christ in Patristic Theology” in *The Oxford Handbook of Christology*, ed. Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015): 155-156.

¹⁰ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* 1.14.13.

¹¹ Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 9.15.

blessedness, became partaker of our human nature and thus offered us a shortcut to participation in his own divine nature.”¹²

The Christian Combat implies a similar breadth of vision when it calls the Christian to a life of “abiding in Him [that] we might be victorious.”¹³ Abiding in Christ is a means of participating in Christ’s humility, obedience, and holiness so as to overcome the devil’s dominion by participation in Christ’s redemption. Augustine concisely states this participatory work in chapter 2: “We have a Master who has deigned to show us how invisible foes are conquered, for the Apostle said of Him: ‘Freeing Himself of His body. He made an example of the principalities and powers, confidently triumphing over them within Himself.’ Consequently, when invisible and sinful desires are overcome, we then overcome the unseen power of our enemy.”¹⁴ Augustine’s reference to the Apostle’s words refers to Colossians 2:15: “He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.”¹⁵ The immediate scriptural context makes clear that Christ’s disarming and triumphing is a result of his incarnation, and that humans share in this triumph by their participation in the crucified life of the incarnate Christ (2:9-14). For Augustine, then, holy living is a participation in Christ’s holiness; victory over the devil is a participation in Christ’s victory; and this act of participation is nothing short of the purpose of the Incarnation.¹⁶

¹² Ibid.

¹³ *The Christian Combat* 1.

¹⁴ Ibid., 2.

¹⁵ NRSV.

¹⁶ Augustine’s *Enchiridion* 108 beautifully expands on this point: “It was expedient that a Mediator, who alone of the human race was born, lived, and died without sin, should reconcile us to God, and procure even for our bodies a resurrection to eternal life, in order that the pride of man might be exposed and cured through the humility of God; . . . that the devil might be subdued by the same nature which it was his boast to have deceived, and yet man not glorified, lest pride should again spring up; and, in fine, with a view to all the advantages which the thoughtful can perceive and describe, or perceive without being able to describe, as flowing from the transcendent mystery of the person of the Mediator.”

This exploration into the broader themes and context of *The Christian Combat* has shown that it is concerned with the full redemptive purpose of the incarnate Christ Himself. Therefore, whatever claims it makes about women are not of minor relevance to some peripheral area of Christian doctrine, but at the very heart of the meaning of the Incarnation.

The Christian Combat: Claims about Femeness

Augustine devotes considerable time in *The Christian Combat* to refuting heresies surrounding the nature of Christ and creation. Among these is a heresy denying the fullness of Christ's humanity, claiming instead that Christ merely inhabited a human body without a soul, and thus was not a theandric union but something more resembling divinity poured into a container.¹⁷ This heretical belief seems to have also taken issue with the reality of Christ's birth, building an argument from Christ's baptism in which the Spirit descends "like a dove" (Matt 3:16). The implied position of Augustine's detractors seems to be: The Spirit's assumption of a dove-like form does not necessitate the Spirit's being hatched from an egg, or visibly birthed at all; why then must the incarnate Son's assumption of human flesh necessitate a true human birth from a female womb? This is the context in which Augustine makes his strong claims of female inclusion in the redemptive purposes of the incarnate Christ, imploring his readers, "Let us believe that *a human nature, whole and entire*, was assumed by the Word of God."¹⁸

Augustine's first appeal is to scripture itself; the same gospel narrative that reports the Spirit's assumption of a dove's form also reports the reality of Christ's birth. Why take the gospel at face value regarding the dove, but question its veracity regarding the woman? "Accordingly, I, too, believe that Christ was born of a virgin because I have read it in the Gospel. Now, the reason why the Holy Spirit was not born of a dove, whereas Christ was born of a woman, is this: The

¹⁷ *The Christian Combat*, 21-23.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 21. Emphasis mine.

Holy Spirit did not come to liberate doves.”¹⁹ Augustine’s seemingly tongue-in-cheek response highlights two important bases for his arguments. First, that the Gospel account is trustworthy; and second, that the *form* of Christ’s incarnation is inextricably linked with its *purpose*, which is the liberation of humanity from the powers of darkness. At stake, then, in the reality of the virgin birth is the authority of scripture and the redemptive purpose of God. Augustine then makes a bold claim:

The Lord Jesus Christ, having come to liberate human beings, including both men and women destined for salvation, was not ashamed of the male nature, for He took it upon Himself; or of the female, for He was born of a woman. Besides, there is the profound mystery that, as death had befallen us through a woman, life should be born to us through a woman. By this defeat, the devil would be tormented over the thought of both sexes, male and female, because he had taken delight in the defection of them both. The freeing of both sexes would not have been so severe a penalty for the devil, unless were were also liberated by the agency of both sexes.²⁰

The Christian Combat is not the only instance of Augustine’s arguing the necessity and fittingness of Christ’s female birth, though it is perhaps the most clearly articulated.²¹ Within this compelling argument, several elements bear further discussion: female inclusion and female victory.

Female Inclusion

Christ’s restoration of humanity required that he be truly human, and humans come into being through childbirth. Because men cannot give birth physiologically, the incarnate Son must be birthed by a female mother. Therefore, for both sexes to be assumed in the Incarnation and equitably involved in human salvation, Christ must be male because his mother must be female. This classical rationale for Christ’s maleness and Mary’s femaleness reveals a “central point of

¹⁹ Ibid., 22.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ See, for example, *Sermons on the New Testament*, 1.3-4.

incarnation teaching”: “God was not ashamed of female and male bodies, or of human embodiment, or of sexuality.”²²

The necessity of Christ’s maleness has been argued by other rationale as well; for example, the prophetic promise that the Messiah would come from the male Davidic line (e.g., Jer 33:14-18). Less palatably, patristic authors—including Augustine—have also argued for the fittingness of Christ’s maleness for reasons of male superiority. For example, in his *Eighty-Three Different Questions*, Augustine employs a similar rationale for the necessity of both sexes, but from the opposite starting point:

When God sets free, he does not free a part, but he frees the whole of that which chances to be in danger. Therefore the Wisdom and Power of God, who is called the only begotten Son, has declared mankind's deliverance through the assumption of human nature. But mankind's deliverance had to be evidenced among both sexes. Therefore, *since it was needful to become a man, which is the more honorable sex*, it reasonably followed that the deliverance of the female sex be seen by that man's birth from a woman.²³

Passages like this reveal Augustine to be a man of his time, conditioned to view men as “more honorable,” a point he makes without comment or explanation, implying that he simply assumes his readers will share his view. Yet even in this male-centered interpretation, one glimpses what Børresen calls Augustine’s “patristic feminism” in his insistence that both sexes be included in human salvation because both sexes are made in the image of God. Other church fathers viewed salvation as either the process of attaining perfected maleness (e.g., becoming a “perfect man” as in Ephesians 4:13) or of restoring humanity to an asexual pre-fall *imago Dei*.²⁴ Augustine, by contrast, sees embodied maleness and femaleness as both created in God’s image, and thus both

²² Oden 266. Oden notes similar arguments made by Theodoret and Gregory of Nazianzus on 266-267.

²³ *Eighty-Three Different Questions*, 11. Emphasis mine.

²⁴ Børresen, 413-416; Schumacher 410-415. Gregory of Nyssa is a representative example of this asexual view. See also the accounts of female martyrs whose death accounts often included visions in which they became male at their glorification; e.g., Katherine Milco, “*Mulieres viriliter vincentes*: Masculine and Feminine Imagery in Augustine’s Sermons on Sts. Perpetua and Felicity,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 69, no. 3 (2015): 276-295.

in need of restoration. Unlike his contemporaries, he does not see sexual differentiation as a result of the fall, but as part of God's original image-bearing intent.²⁵ Even when he contradicts his own reasoning about Christ's assumed maleness and femaleness, he still honors femaleness as equally image-bearing to maleness, and thus equally in need of the restorative work of the Incarnation. To paraphrase his claim quoted above from *The Christian Combat*: "Let us believe that a human nature, whole and entire, *male and female*, was assumed by the Word of God."²⁶

Situating Augustine among his contemporaries and within his own corpus reveals the unique strength of his arguments for female inclusion in human salvation. This uniqueness is further strengthened when one recognizes that within *The Christian Combat*, he "makes the female birth-enabler the primary basis upon which the incarnate Lord was more plausibly to be male."²⁷ To imagine Christ's maleness in relation to Mary's femaleness, and to take female agency rather than male supremacy as his starting point, is a remarkable claim of sexual inclusion in the incarnation.

²⁵ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 12.7.10. Augustine clarifies Paul's position in 1 Corinthians 11 by distinguishing between the *nature* of females bearing the *imago Dei* at creation, but the *activity* of female subordination as not bearing the *imago Dei*, since God is not subordinate to any other being. Though his conclusion still denigrates women's image-bearing faculty while functioning as a subordinate helpmeet (a function he takes as a given), it nevertheless acknowledges his clear affirmation of females *qua* females bearing the image of God. "But we must notice how that which the apostle says, that not the woman but the man is the image of God, is not contrary to that which is written in Genesis, God created man: in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them: and He blessed them. For this text says that human nature itself, which is complete [only] in both sexes, was made in the image of God; and it does not separate the woman from the image of God which it signifies. For after saying that God made man in the image of God, He created him, it says, male and female: or at any rate, punctuating the words otherwise, male and female created He them. How then did the apostle tell us that the man is the image of God, and therefore he is forbidden to cover his head; but that the woman is not so, and therefore is commanded to cover hers? Unless, forsooth, according to that which I have said already, . . . that the woman together with her own husband is the image of God, so that that whole substance may be one image; but when she is referred separately to her quality of help-meet, which regards the woman herself alone, then she is not the image of God." I am grateful to Burnell for his helpful interpretation of this passage. Peter Burnell, *The Augustinian Person* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 2005), 44-50.

²⁶ *The Christian Combat* 21. "Male and female" added.

²⁷ Oden 266.

Female Victory

Augustine's contribution in *The Christian Combat* provides still further grounds for a female-affirming Christology in its imagery of female victory. Female agency, alongside male agency, is described as a vehicle of redemptive reversal, human liberation, and conquest over the devil.²⁸ First, female agency is a vehicle of redemptive reversal in "the profound mystery that, as death had befallen us through a woman, life should be born to us through a woman."²⁹ Mary's humble assent reverses Eve's proud disobedience, and her womb provides all the human matter of Christ's incarnation by which all things will be restored. Against radical womanist interpretations of Mary that view God's "overshadowing" of her womb as akin to divine rape,³⁰ Mary voices her willing consent: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Lk 1:35,38). Even Augustine ascribes "agency" to her, all the more notable because his belief in female subordination (described above) would not require Mary's agency, only her passivity. Yet he cites Mary's agency as essential to the liberation of her sex: "The freeing of both sexes would not have been so severe a penalty for the devil, unless were were also liberated by the agency of both sexes."³¹

Augustine's repeated mention of human liberation hearkens to Luke's portrayal of Mary in 1:26-55. There, Mary is not merely a representative female or a paragon of purity, but a fleshed-out human being, one with a particular voice, will, ancestry, and messianic hope. Mary's reception of the angel's call places her within a "long line of female liberators including Shiprah,

²⁸ *The Christian Conquest*, 22.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ For representative arguments, see Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2013) and Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000).

³¹ *The Christian Combat*, 22.

Puah, Deborah, Jael, Esther, and Judith.”³² Further, Mary’s use of the term “slave of the Lord” (1:38)—a phrase ascribed to Abraham, Moses, Joshua, and Daniel—conveys her acceptance of her role in the redemption of her people, an acceptance then beautifully articulated in the Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55). Augustine’s reference to Mary’s liberator status situates her within the humanizing context of Luke’s gospel, where she demonstrates volitional faithfulness to God’s purposes by her words and the offering of her womb.

Finally, *The Christian Combat* portrays female agency as conquering the devil: “By this defeat, the devil would be tormented over the thought of both sexes, male and female, because he had taken delight in the defection of them both.”³³ A female victor would have represented an especially humiliating blow to an enemy whose successful temptation of a female in the garden had ushered in the fall of humanity. As described earlier in this paper, victory over the devil was a key element of Augustine’s view of atonement and the stated purpose of the Incarnation. This victory is the end of the Christian life, and *The Christian Combat* was written to instruct Christians to participate in this victory.³⁴ Thus Augustine’s imagery is not merely a smug delight in the devil’s frustration, but a stirring cosmic picture of victorious female participation in God’s redemptive purpose. Mary’s femaleness is an essential element of this victory, reversing Eve’s gullibility in a decisive victory. Moreover, Mary’s womb ensures the full humanity of Christ and thus his ability to conquer the devil’s works once and for all.³⁵

³² Tim Perry and Daniel Kendall, SJ, *The Blessed Virgin Mary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013): 22. Scribd ebook.

³³ *The Christian Combat*, 22.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

³⁵ Augustine’s numerous sermons on female martyrs Perpetua and Felicity (who was pregnant at her martyrdom) provide an interesting example of how this theme of female victory emerges elsewhere in his preaching. Milco argues persuasively that there, too, the martyrs’ female sex and maternity are not liabilities but weapons by which they conquer the spiritual forces opposing them. Milco, 293.

Augustine's uniquely female portrayal of redemptive reversal, liberation, and conquest in *The Christian Combat* together hallow Mary's willing participation in Christ's incarnation. They present female agency as an essential and fitting element of the Incarnation. And they cast Mary in a positive role that is distinctly female, emphasizing her humanity over her virginal purity.³⁶

Conclusion

This paper has argued that *The Christian Combat* presents a patristic argument for an inclusive view of the Incarnation. But why does such an argument still matter today? Surely nobody today questions the efficacy of Christ's work for both sexes, nor the ontological equality of men and women as image bearers? Why press an obscure text for patristic precedence for ideas that are already firmly rooted in modern Christianity?

But however settled the matter of sexual inclusion may seem, many voices in the church continue to critique Christianity's views and treatment of women. Feminist theologians often trace these problematic views to Christianity's "fundamental exclusion of femaleness at the divine level."³⁷ This exclusion is still felt acutely today in many parts of the church. In recent years, for example, conservative American evangelicalism³⁸—typically no haven of feminist theology—has experienced a groundswell of critique for its teaching on gender roles and

³⁶ Certainly, Mary's virginity is a biblical truth. Still, when emphasized as her primary trait, Mary can seem less like an embodied human being and more like a higher-order spiritual being of unassailable purity. The tendency to emphasize her virginity is prominent not only among Roman Catholics, but evangelicals as well. "Evangelicals were concerned to defend the miraculous character of the virgin birth because they saw it undergirding the deity of Jesus Christ. The prominence of the virgin birth teaching among the Apostolic Fathers, however, arose from a different Christological concern: as an affirmation of the true humanity and genuine historicity of the Son of God." From Timothy George, "Evangelicals and the Mother of God," *First Things* (February 2007): <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2007/02/evangelicals-and-the-mother-of-god>

³⁷ Børessen, 415.

³⁸ Definitions of "evangelical" are notoriously difficult to pin down, particularly as the term has taken on political undertones in its North American context. Here, I am using evangelical in the broad sense of a shared commitment to Bebbington's quadrilateral: biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, activism. David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2-17.

sexuality. This critique has taken many forms, from the #ChurchToo movement³⁹ to institutional scandals⁴⁰ to the popularity of recent bestsellers such as Beth Allison Barr’s *The Making of Biblical Womanhood* and Kristin Kobes DuMez’s *Jesus and John Wayne*, and Aimee Byrd’s *Recovering from Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*. Together, these voices and others accuse evangelicalism of distorted, even dehumanizing views of femaleness.

Similar critiques have been leveled by feminist theologians for decades. Summarizing and quoting the work of several prominent feminist theologians, Schumacher writes:

In contrast to [patristic] consciousness, our own cultural climate is one wherein “it is not divinity-humanity, but the male-female dualism which bedevils. It is thus asked: how is it possible that one sex—the male—is capable of representing and redeeming both sexes? Can “a symbol which would appear to be necessarily male . . . be said to be inclusive of all humanity”? And in reverse, how can a woman see herself “as made in the image of a male God, a God whose human face is seen in the man Jesus”?⁴¹

While Augustine’s *The Christian Combat* offers no practical solutions, it challenges the foundation upon which this critique is built, arguing persuasively that the incarnate male Christ *is*, in fact, “inclusive of all humanity.” Augustine invites a creative re-examination of Christ’s incarnation from the starting point of his female birth mother, an approach rooted in Christian

³⁹ #ChurchToo is a social media movement, sparked by the secular #MeToo movement, to expose sexual harassment and abuse within the Christian church. Unlike its secular counterpart, #ChurchToo often includes critiques of conservative evangelical teachings on sexual purity and gender roles. The hashtag rose to prominence online in 2017. Emily Joy Allison, *#ChurchToo: How Purity Culture Upholds Abuse and How to Find Healing* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2021), ix-x.

⁴⁰ For example, the highly publicized sex scandals involving Ravi Zacharias, the departure of popular Bible teacher Beth Moore from the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), or the recent ordination of three women by the SBC-affiliated megachurch Saddleback (the SBC does not permit women to preach, lead, or pastor). See, respectively: Daniel Silliman and Kate Shellnut, “Ravi Zacharias Hid Hundreds of Pictures of Women, Abuse During Massages, and a Rape Allegation,” *Christianity Today*, 11 February 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/february/ravi-zacharias-rzim-investigation-sexual-abuse-sexting-rape.html>; Bob Smietana, “Bible Teacher Beth Moore splitting with Lifeway, says, ‘I am no longer a Southern Baptist,’” *Religion News Service*, 9 March 2021, <https://religionnews.com/2021/03/09/bible-teacher-beth-moore-ends-partnership-with-lifeway-i-am-no-longer-a-southern-baptist/>; Michael Gryboski, “‘Historic night’: Saddleback Church ordains first female pastors,” *Christian Post*, 7 May 2021, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/saddleback-church-ordains-first-female-pastors.html>.

⁴¹ Schumacher, 410.

tradition and the authority of scripture. Because Augustine often shoulders the blame for Christian patriarchy and misogyny, a retrieval of his views holds potential for imagining a more inclusive Christology without sacrificing consensual orthodoxy. To that end, *The Christian Combat* is a fruitful starting point, rich in compelling imagery of female inclusion in Christ's incarnation.

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