

## **Re-Imagining**

### **By David Feddes**

"You shall not make for yourself an idol." Exodus 20:4

The conference was called "Re-Imagining," and it certainly lived up to its name. The people gathered in Minneapolis to re-imagine nearly every aspect of the Christian faith. Billed as "A Global Theological Conference for Women," it was linked with the World Council of Churches and received funding from several major denominations.

Prayer was re-imagined. Instead of prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, a group prayer ended with the words, "through the power and guidance of the spirit of wisdom whom we name Sophia."

The Lord's Supper was re-imagined. Instead of serving bread and wine as tokens of Jesus' body and blood, they served milk and honey in celebration of Sophia. They praised and thanked Sophia for "the nourishment of your milk and honey" and "the sharing of this holy manna."

Jesus was also re-imagined, obviously. He became she. God was to be found not in a Jewish carpenter from Nazareth but in a vaguely feminine entity called Sophia, the Greek word for wisdom which conveniently happens to be a feminine name.

At other times, Jesus was re-imagined not so much as a goddess but as a part of nature. Chinese feminist Kwok Pui-Lan claimed, "If we cannot imagine Jesus as a tree, as a river, as wind, and as rain, we are doomed together." Another speaker advised: If you feel very tired and you don't have any energy to give, what you do is ... go to a big tree and ask it to, 'give me some of your life energy.'" (Ironically, though, there was one tree you shouldn't go to for help: the cross of Calvary.)

Salvation through Jesus' death was re-imagined. Delores Williams, a womanist professor of theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York, said, "I don't think we need a theory of atonement at all. Atonement has to do so much with death. I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff. We do not need atonement, we just need to listen to the god within."

The name and nature of God were re-imagined. Barbara Lundblad, a Lutheran pastor, openly said, "Some would call our worship of last night verging on heresy... We did not last night name the name of Jesus. Nor have we done anything in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Her statement reportedly was followed by laughter and cheers.

Christian sexual morals were re-imagined. Lesbian theologian Mary Hunt said, "Imagine sex among friends as the norm... Imagine, just imagine... Pleasure is our birthright of which we have been robbed in religious patriarchy. It is time to claim it anew with our friends." Janie Spahr, another lesbian minister, said that her theology is first of all informed by making love with her lesbian partner. She said, "Sexuality and spirituality have to come together—and Church, we're going to teach you." Melanie Morrison, co-founder of Christian Lesbians Out Together (CLOUT), asked for a time to celebrate "the miracle of being lesbian, out, and Christian." Then she invited all other lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual women to join hands and encircle the stage. Many in the audience stood to applaud.

In all of this, divine revelation was re-imagined. Leaders of Church Women United reacted to criticism of the conference by insisting on "the absolute right of women to develop theological understandings rooted in their own realities and experiences." Apparently, a book inspired by God won't tell us as much about God as "the realities and experiences" of women committed to the agenda of radical feminism.

When news of all this re-imagining got back to the grassroots members of the denominations that helped pay for it, there was an uproar. So how did supporters of the conference respond to the criticism? They rushed to claim victim status. When members of the Presbyterian Church USA protested that their denomination had given \$66,000 to support an event that contradicted everything the Bible teaches, one of the staffers said of the protest, "It is spiritual rape." When Christians protest attacks on their God, their Savior, their Bible, and their faith, the re-imaginings called the protest spiritual rape. But the Bible calls it spiritual prostitution when people abandon God's revelation and offer themselves to a re-imagined deity.

One confusing thing about all this is that the re-imaginings still want to be considered part of Christianity. Instead of candidly saying they want to replace Christianity, they try to redefine Christianity, and they feel insulted and violated by those who say this kind of reimagining has no place in the church. But if people want to speak of Sophia instead of Christ, why call it Christianity? Why not call it Sophistry?

### **Redefining God**

The second of God's Ten Commandments is "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything" (Exodus 20:4). What this commandment prohibits is making images of God, or to put it another way, it prohibits re-imagining God. The Lord commands us to worship him as he's revealed himself, not as we re-imagine him.

Christians throughout history have believed in a God who reveals himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Not everyone shares this belief, of course. There have always been people who rejected the God of Christianity to worship other gods. When people worshipped Baal or Ishtar or Zeus, they made it pretty obvious that they had no loyalty to the God revealed in the Bible. Likewise, Hindus and Buddhists and Muslims make no secret of it that they aren't Christians and don't claim to be. We who are Christians hope they will yet come to know the triune God and eternal life in Jesus Christ, but meanwhile, different religions know where they stand in relation to each other.

The Bible condemns the worship of other gods in the first of the Ten Commandments: "You shall have no other gods before me." God commands his people not to get involved in other religions or cross the boundary from faith in him to faith in something else.

It gets trickier, however, when the temptation is not so much to cross a boundary and join another religion, but to reshape the faith and re-imagine God right within the boundaries of God's people. This is what the second commandment addresses.

People with a Christian background decide they don't like the historic Christian faith, but they still want to call themselves Christians, and they want the Christian church to accommodate their views. There are people who deny the Holy Trinity, defy the Scriptures, denounce the church, deride forgiveness in Jesus' blood, delight in sin,

and yet demand to be considered part of Christianity. They don't say the Christian God should be rejected. They just say God must be re-imagined.

Why would anyone want to hang onto some association with God, and yet make up a new image to represent him? Well, let's consider a notorious example from the Bible.

Right while Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments, the people at the bottom of the mountain were getting impatient. "When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us" (Exodus 32:1).

They wanted to get moving, and they needed a god who would go with them. There's nothing handier than a deity you can push along in front of you. He gives you power, and you give him orders—sort of like having a genie who does your bidding. Why trust an invisible God who has his own timing and his own plans, when you can manufacture something that will follow your agenda and empower you?

People are sometimes reluctant to make an idol on their own, however. They want a religious authority figure to do it for them. It usually takes a pastor or seminary professor or priest to produce a new version of God with that extra touch of professional quality. That's why the Israelites wanted Aaron to make their idol for them. Aaron the priest was second in authority only to his brother Moses. If Aaron made a new image of God, it would be good for sure. So Aaron took a collection of gold jewelry from the people, melted it down, and fashioned a calf out of it.

Now, notice very carefully what happened next. Once the people had their golden calf, they didn't say, "Now we have a new god to replace the one that rescued us from Egypt." No, they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." Aaron "built an altar in front of the calf and announced, 'Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord'" (Exodus 32:4). To the Lord! They wanted to worship a portable god of fertility and wealth, they were wildly enthusiastic about their golden calf, but they still wanted to indentify it with the Lord who made Mount Sinai tremble, the God whose power had broken the grip of Egypt and set them free. They didn't want to dispense entirely with the mighty God of their past; not at all! They just wanted to re-imagine him as one who would follow their agenda rather than setting their agenda for them.

But just as the Israelites were worshipping their new image, just when they were really getting into their orgy of celebration, Moses came back, and the party was over. The Lord was so enraged by these people who re-imagined him as a golden calf, as a god of fertility and sex and gold, that he threatened to wipe them all out. Only when Moses interceded for the people did God relent from destroying them, and even then, a number were killed. Re-imagining is not something that God takes lightly. In the second commandment, the Lord says,

You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments (Exodus 20:4-7).

Re-imagining God has devastating consequences, not only for ourselves but also for our children and grandchildren. It's not just a personal choice. When one generation abandons God's revelation of himself, the children and grandchildren often suffer as well. Once God is re-imagined, succeeding generations are taught to hate the great God revealed in Scripture and in Christ. They learn to think of him as a deity fit only for freaks and fanatics and fundamentalists. But each generation that hates the Lord finds itself under punishment. As people make up their own religion and do their own thing, their lives and families and communities disintegrate more and more, providing a taste of even greater agony to come in eternity.

### **Feminizing God**

However, this isn't the whole picture, thank God. His revelation has far more staying power than our re-imagining. The Lord who speaks in the Bible and embodies himself in Jesus Christ continues to reign long after each new heresy and re-imagining has been discarded as obsolete. The havoc of the re-imaginers may last three or four generations, but the historic Christian faith has embraced people in the love of God for a thousand generations.

We looked earlier at some of the ways that ultra-feminists in Minneapolis tried to improve on the Bible and re-imagine God. They felt more comfortable worshipping an abstract projection of their own femaleness than the living God, whose supreme revelation of himself was a carpenter from Nazareth who died to take away the sins of the world. The "Re-Imagining" conference may sound like an extreme example, but the whole project of feminizing God as much as possible—praying to our Mother in heaven, calling God "she," and so forth—is a sacred cow (or should I say, a golden calf) in some very influential circles. Remember, the "Re-imagining" conference wasn't just a fringe group of women doing their own thing. It was funded by several major denominations who later defended what occurred there. It was supported by the World Council of Churches, and featured professors from prominent seminaries.

In some divinity schools and seminaries, it is considered more important to be committed to the feminist agenda than to the historic Christian faith. Jon Levenson, a professor who is devoted to Judaism, tells of a conversation he had with some professors of Christian theology at a major divinity school. He asked them if there were any doctrinal standards they were expected to uphold in their teaching. The theologians around the table all said: no, they had complete academic freedom and could teach anything they wanted. Then one of them added, "Well, there is one requirement. We have to use inclusive language."

Dr. Levenson, a Jew, found it ironic that supposedly Christian professors of theology could contradict historic Christianity, they could promote any novel idea of God they wanted, but if they said the Christian God reveals himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit they might get in trouble since that kind of language might not be considered gender-inclusive enough. All too often, theology need not be orthodox or biblical, but it had better be politically correct.

### **A Different Jesus**

Another example of professional re-imaginers are those who reject the Bible's portrait of Jesus and try to define "the real Jesus." Maybe you've heard of the Jesus

Seminar, where scholars get together and decide which words of Jesus in the gospels Jesus actually said. Using color-coding and other media-friendly gimmicks, these self-proclaimed experts mark what Jesus could not possibly have said, what he probably didn't say, what he perhaps could have said, and what he probably said. It turns out Jesus didn't say most of what the gospels claim he said. One national magazine said that although the Jesus Seminar upsets many devout Christians, it presents a Jesus that some people find more human and believable. But when Jesus is whittled down to the point where he's more believable, he's no longer worth believing in.

Amazing, isn't it, how scholars 2000 years later are so smart that they know the historical Jesus better than those who actually saw and heard and touched him. Even more amazing, the Jesus produced by the Jesus Seminar turns out to sound and act remarkably like skeptical twentieth century scholars would want him to look. I'm afraid the Jesus Seminar tells us more about members of the Seminar than it tells us about Jesus.

### **God's Self-Revelation**

The moment we think we're smarter than the Word of God, we are fashioning our own image of God. When the Lord commands, "You shall not make an idol in the form of anything," what is he saying? "What is God's will for us in the second commandment? That we in no way make any image of God nor worship him in any other way than he has commanded us in his Word" (Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 96). The basic issue is this: Are we going to worship God as he reveals himself, or as a projection of what we would like him to be? Are we going to trust in Jesus Christ, "the same yesterday and today and forever," or in a new-and-improved version of God?

The Lord prohibits making images of him. He condemns re-imagining him. Why? Because when we do that, we're trying to dictate who God can be and what he can do. We're trying to take control of him. When the living God is too independent of our wishes, when the Jesus of the gospels doesn't suit what we think he should be like, when the Bible says things that are too awkward to suit our agenda, we're tempted to fashion a new image of God that suits us better. Rather than accepting God's revelation of himself, we define God to fit our own ideas and preferences. Our image can't be anything we don't want it to be. It can't do anything we don't want it to do. It serves our goals and advances our agenda. We control it.

But in the process, we lose the living and true God, and we're left with our own powerless projections. Whether it's Aaron making a golden calf, or some religious authority today re-imagining the God of the Bible, it's still a lot of bull.

In the second commandment, God declares his own sovereign freedom and independence. He insists that we worship him as he reveals himself to be, not as we simply imagine him to be. He commands this for the sake of his own honor but also for the sake of our salvation.

When individuals re-imagine God in a way that contradicts the holy Scriptures, they are committing spiritual suicide. When denominations and divinity schools become idol-factories and promote their idols to others, they are committing spiritual homicide. Our souls cannot survive if they are deprived of God's life-giving words. As Moses said, "They are not just idle words for you—they are your life" (Deuteronomy 32:47). Jesus himself said, "The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life" (John 6:63).

When you re-imagine Jesus to be a projection of feminist ideology, you cut yourself off from the Son of the living God, the supreme gift of love that God gave to a perishing world. When you say you don't need Jesus' cross or his blood to be right with God, that all you need to do is contact the god or goddess inside you, you refuse the only way God has provided to remove your sin. When you reject God's commandments for your sexuality and all the other areas of your life and instead re-imagine God to suit your most corrupt and perverted instincts, you condemn yourself to a life of wallowing in wickedness and an eternity of separation from God.

God gives the second commandments so that we will recognize all our attempts at re-imagining for what they are: offensive to him and destructive to ourselves. We cannot define God according to our own ideas, or control God according to our own agenda. God is God, and we can only know him insofar as he chooses to reveal himself in his Word. God is God, and we can have a relationship with him only on his terms, and because of his great love revealed in Jesus Christ. God gives us the second commandment to drive us away from our sin and draw us to the Savior, to drive us away from our phony re-imaginings and draw us to his glorious revelation, to drive us away from idols that bring curses on us and our children and draw us into his everlasting love.

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