

Christ as Countermodel to Hypermasculine Identity Construction

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ABSTRACT

Hypermasculine identity refers to a macho personality constellation that views toughness, dominance, emotional self-control, heroism amidst danger and callous attitudes towards women and sex as ideal masculine virtues. Such an identity disparages ‘feminine affects’ such as emotion, caring, vulnerability and distress as forms of weakness. Underlying this identity construction is a coercive notion of dominance and an egocentric understanding of freedom as consisting of control over others. The questions probed are: Is New Testament Christology not complicit in generating hypermasculine identity constructions? What counter narrative can the Christian faith provide to hypermasculine identity formation and enculturation? After discussing Colleen Conway’s hypothesis that New Testament Christology replicates Greco-Roman imperial masculine doctrine, this essay proceeds to argue that the themes of the kingdom of God and the example of Christ provide viable alternatives to hypermasculine notions of domination, freedom and sex. God’s reign relativizes all earthly power and encourages us to trust in God’s reign rather than attempting to control history. Christ’s moral example signifies true freedom as consisting of a ‘freedom to and for the other’ rather than a ‘freedom over the other.’ Sex is not about domination of the opposite gender but reciprocal love. The essay concludes that the Church can play an important role in re-integrating hypermasculine individuals into society by being a community of loving recognition.

Introduction

Identity refers to the way people view themselves in relation to the various contexts, spaces and places within which they operate. Ethnic self-understanding, perceived gender roles, sexual orientation, religious affiliations, moral commitments and peer assessment are critical factors in the formation of our identities.¹ To be sure, we cannot avoid adopting an identity, because self-definition is an inescapable part of personhood and human agency. Human beings act, relate and make decisions

1 See Margaret Beale Spencer, Suzanne Fegley, Vinay Harpalani & Gregory Seaton, “Understanding Hypermasculinity in Context: A Theory-Driven Analysis of Urban Adolescent Males’ Coping Responses”, *Research in Human Development* 1, no. 4 (2004), 229-257, 233.