

Rightside Up Again: Adolescent Girls, Theology of the Cross, and the Church's Response

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*"...and ain't I a woman?
that little man in black there say
a woman can't have as much rights as a man
cause Christ wasn't a woman
Where did your Christ come from?
From God and a woman!
If the first woman God ever made
was strong enough to turn the world
upside down, all alone
together women ought to be able to turn it
rightside up again."¹*

Adolescent girls live in a liminal space. While they are no longer children, they are also not yet adults, no matter what their bodies might say to the contrary to those now casting their gazes upon them. They are expected to be good and nice, but also to be the right kind of bad, especially for the sake of their male social media followers. Girls are told that they can do anything they want and be anything they want, yet they perceive that success for women is equated with unnatural thinness, airbrushed beauty, and constant sexiness. Even their textbooks and classes do not highlight successful, intelligent, brave women, instead continuing to focus on white men. The media is even more damaging, portraying women and girls as sexualized objects created for the pleasure and amusement of men and boys, and to the derision and judgment of other women and girls. Social media enslaves American girls, regardless of their race, class, location, or level of education.² Its pervasiveness among young women is matched only by its potential for damage upon their hearts, minds, and bodies. Young men are also in grave danger, for they are socialized to view women not as whole people, but rather as bodies. This vicious viewpoint seemingly leaves space for violence and sexual assault against girls and women. Relentlessly living within this treacherous liminal space, it is no wonder that adolescent girls, who are also in the developmentally precarious

1. Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I a Woman?" in *Ain't I a Woman! A Book of Women's Poetry from Around the World*, ed. Illona Linthwaite (New York: Wings Books, 1987), 129.

2. Nancy Jo Sales, *American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 10.

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identity formation period, are not flourishing.³

This article takes an in depth look at the incessant struggle and stress that plague adolescent girls, for it is crucial to understand the problems facing them before trying to address those issues. Indeed, much is at stake in this conversation. The stress, violence, and losses accumulated during adolescence are persistent, the effects lasting far into adulthood. Moreover, they keep girls from becoming those whom God intends them to be, showing them that they are not beloved children of their Heavenly Parent, but rather small and insignificant. American girls do not need more empty words promising that life will be easier when they grow up or telling them that they are not worth listening to and that their problems do not matter. On the contrary, adolescent girls need a theology of the cross, where God meets them in their suffering and where the crucified and risen Christ, relatable and real, offers hope in the midst of fear and sorrow. It is the work of the church to help claim a theology of the cross and connect it to strategies for helping girls develop into whole, healthy young women, ready to dream big and live into their callings as beloved children of God.

Adolescent girls

Adolescence is a time of physical, mental, and emotional development. It can leave parents wondering: "What happened to my little girl?" as they see their energetic, loquacious, and outdoor-loving eight-year-old shift into a taciturn, looks- and phone-obsessed

3. Norma Cook Everist, *The Church as Learning Community: A Comprehensive Guide to Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 155.

thirteen-year-old. As Mary Pipher writes:

In early adolescence, studies show that girls' IQ scores drop and their math and science scores plummet. They lose their resiliency and optimism and become less curious and inclined to take risks. They lose their assertive, energetic, and 'tomboyish' personalities and become more deferential, self-critical and depressed. They report great unhappiness with their own bodies.⁴

Clearly, this is a tough time for girls. With the internal losses and struggles that continue as girls grow up, once they reach ages twelve and thirteen, their bodies join the fray. For most girls, this is the beginning of profound physical changes. Unfortunately, physical development severs a girl's connection as a child in the eyes of the world and marks her firmly as a woman.⁵ They quickly become objects under the predatory masculine gaze and judgmental feminine gaze.

During adolescence girls often fall into the "niceness trap." They are taught that they must be nice in order to maintain relationships.⁶ What this really means is that a girl must suppress her authentic self and voice, because it might bother someone or endanger a friendship. What this really means is that a girl is not allowed to express her true emotions, especially if her emotions are deemed "not nice," and not appropriate for a girl, such as anger, sadness, and frustration. Since girls are constantly told to be nice, not real, they never have the opportunity to learn coping strategies. Rather, they are taught to hide what they are thinking and feeling. As a result, as Pipher notes, girls stop thinking, "'Who am I? What do I want?' and start thinking, 'What must I do to please others?'"⁷

Once a girl has been conditioned to bury her true self, she has nothing on which to base her self-confidence or self-esteem. Consequently, these too disappear. With these gone, dreams vanish as well, resulting in fewer opportunities being sought out and undertaken. Lacking dreams is perpetuated by a lack of role models and readily available examples of women who are thriving in leadership, science, math, and technology. Indeed, it is well noted that a girl cannot be what she cannot see. Another problem is that even when girls are shown images of successful women, the images maintain society's view of femininity as essential to their success, meaning that they must be thin, nice, and sexy.⁸ Consequently, a girl's dreams become as small and false as a model's retouched waist.

Lacking solid and relentless positive images of women, girls turn instead to their peers and the media for their knowledge, approval, and support. In schools, cliques set the standards for behavior and

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appearance. As Rosalind Wiseman points out: "On a daily basis, [an adolescent girl] learns what kind of girl she is 'required' to be in order to be accepted by a group or the consequences of standing her ground."⁹ This is especially true in relation to boys, who gain unprecedented power over girls' actions, hearts, and minds during adolescence. A girl will do anything, degrade herself and let go of formerly firmly held beliefs in order to capture the attention of and to please a boy.

Boys also gain physical power over girls. Violence against women and girls is perpetuated by socializing boys to see girls as objects and also by the normalization of pornography. It is easier to commit violence against objectified people, which is how boys are conditioned to see women. The statistics of violence against girls and women are alarming. For example, in the U.S. one out of every four women have experienced domestic violence, and one out of six has experienced attempted or completed rape.¹⁰ These and other similar statistics mean that you know a girl or woman, probably multiple ones, who is a survivor of violence, assault, or rape by a boy or a man. Yet, our society still views violence against girls and women as a private problem—something to be dealt with in the home or, preferably, not dealt with at all. As a result, girls live in fear. Here are three themes girls notice in relation to violence:

- (1) They believe that the world is getting more violent, and that they are in more danger each year;
- (2) they live in constant awareness of the violence around them, and the effects of violence on their own and others' lives; and
- (3) they believe victimization is a normal part of life, and expect to experience abuse or violence themselves.¹¹

Girls are constantly shown that they are worthless, that any trust they place in others is misguided, and that they must change how they live to accommodate violence. This includes violence against self. Indeed, the sexualization and objectification of girls causes "low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, eating disorders,

4. Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1994), 19.

5. Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan, *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girl's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 164.

6. Patricia H. Davis, *Beyond Nice: The Spiritual Wisdom of Adolescent Girls* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), x.

7. Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia*, 22.

8. Peggy Orenstein, *Cinderella Ate My Daughter* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), 7–8.

9. Rosalind Wiseman, *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and the New Realities of Girl World* (New York: Harmony Books, 2009), 79.

10. Elizabeth Gerhardt, *The Cross and Gendercide: A Theological Response to Global Violence Against Women and Girls* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2014), 13.

11. Davis, *Beyond Nice*, 100.

cutting, even cognitive dysfunction.”¹² Violence against self can be an effort to try and regain control over their bodies and their lives. The violence can take the form of an eating disorder, cutting, burning, or use of drugs or alcohol. Girls no longer believe in their own innate value.

One of the main issues in the lives of adolescent girls is the ever-present hold of social media in their everyday lives. Indeed, “[f]or most American girls, social media is where they live.”¹³ A major problem, among others, with social media is its content. Most platforms are replete with images of nearly naked girls and women. Comments are uncensored, demeaning, and shame-based, pushing to the edge of pornography. Since such language and images are so widespread, they are considered normal and permissible. Further, due to the nature of our American culture, girls are stuck. They are expected to post provocative selfies and be flattered by crude comments. Social media is an insidious obsession, one they are helpless to escape.

Theology of the cross

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”¹⁴ How many adolescent girls have shouted, wept, or whispered some form of these words into the darkness of the night? Girls live in suffering, doubt, and fear. They lose themselves in the power of the other, perhaps never to find out who they truly are. These realities are why a theology of the cross should be the foundation of the church's response to the crisis facing adolescent girls. As church, we have the privilege of listening to girls' stories, taking them seriously. Moreover, we can proclaim the good news of the crucified and risen Christ within their brokenness, fear, and loss. This is at the heart of a theology of the cross, calling the thing what it actually is.¹⁵ Thus we are not to belittle the suffering of girls, but rather to listen to them and be with them in their pain and confusion. It is in the very midst of this suffering that Christ offers a profound message of hope. In Jesus Christ crucified and risen, God has freed us from the powers of sin, death, and the devil. God does not promise happiness all the days of our lives, but something so much more real. God promises to be with us amid our pain and suffering.

This is indeed good news for adolescent girls. Christ is a co-sufferer. Indeed, there is no place they can go, no chasm so deep, no pain so acute that Christ has not already been there. He has experienced and thereby understands the suffering of their lives. Christ knows what it is to be tempted, to weep at the death of a friend, and devastatingly to be talked about behind his back and betrayed by someone he trusted. He knows what it feels like to have his identity questioned, his movement through life ridiculed, and his presence unappreciated, even rejected. For girls who are struggling to find and maintain authentic relationships, Christ's

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life and death are examples of “deep solidarity.”¹⁶ Christ becomes a relatable God, someone to cling to and appeal to in times of trouble. As girls face violence, loss of control, and loss of self, they need to hear that nothing and no one can separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

As the church we cannot skip over the trials and struggles of life, moving quickly past the Good Friday periods and into the Easter Sunday glory without those silent days of pain and confusion. On the cross, our sins and our suffering are stripped bare and exposed. We see and claim our brokenness. However, we cannot abandon people in the shadows, leaving them lifeless and without the hope of the resurrection. Indeed, in the empty tomb we recognize and rejoice that God loves us and died to save us from the powers of sin, death, and the devil. Both the suffering and the hope are essential to shine light into girls' lives.

These are our girls—our daughters, sisters, friends, and neighbors. They are in our churches and communities, not in some other place far away. These are our girls. The first step for the church in this process is to see and name the problem—that our girls are being lost, drowning in an ocean of unachievable standards of beauty, ever-present social media, looming violence, and the objectifying, sexualizing gazes of men. You see, our girls desperately need a Savior. They need someone who sees their distress, cares about them, and jumps into the swells with them. This Savior might not calm the waters. However, this Savior has been there before and promises to stay with them and take them out of the storm.

The response of the church

Rethinking and restructuring religious education for girls is no small task. However, it is a necessary one. Allowing time and space for girls to discover and claim their authentic selves, within the context of a theology of the cross and the gospel, should be the mission of religious education for adolescent girls. Indeed, the church is privileged to proclaim the Savior to them, giving them hope and

12. Sales, *American Girls*, 14.

13. *Ibid.*, 9.

14. Matthew 27:46.

15. Martin Luther, “Heidelberg Disputation,” in *Luther's Works*, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 31:53.

16. Arnfridur Gudmundsdottir, *Meeting God on the Cross: Christ, the Cross, and the Feminist Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

a lifeline to grasp hold of in the midst of their stormy lives.

A vital aspect of this process involves creating safe learning environments, both physically and in the type of teaching and learning being done. For example, we are challenged to move from a traditional pedagogical model toward an andragogy model, where girls can experience mutual teaching, learning, trust, and respect. Yet, safety does not mean silence on difficult topics. These mutual, trusting communities can have open and honest discussions about difficult topics, such as abuse, sex, sexuality, and self-harm. Within these safe spaces, girls find wholeness through the gospel and through community. "Girls know they are losing themselves. One girl said, 'Everything good in me died in junior high.' Wholeness is shattered by the chaos of adolescence."¹⁷ However, wholeness can be restored by cultivating healthy practices and coping strategies. It is through looking to the cross that we find wholeness. We are made whole, not perfect, in the transformation of baptism, for we remain simultaneously saint and sinner even as we walk in newness of life.

We can use the power of language and words to cultivate change within the church. First, we need to change the language we use to talk about God. Talking about God in exclusively male language is oppressive, exclusionary, and contrary to the gospel. Indeed, for a young girl, it is not a big leap to believe that "if God is male, then the male is God,"¹⁸ since this message is constantly reinforced within society and within the church. It will take creativity and perseverance to make these changes. We can find expansive language for God in scripture as well as in new liturgies and hymns that speak of God expansively. Second, the church can help girls cultivate the practice of journaling. A journal can be a safe place for girls to be open and honest, to explore their own thoughts and feelings about their lives, communities, and the world around them. By journaling, girls can once again begin to discover and cultivate their voice, which is crucial for reclaiming their authentic selves.

Complementary to journaling are practices of embodied theology and spirituality. As girls' bodies change and they experience the objectification of their bodies, they need space to celebrate their unique beauty. Indeed, God loves and honors bodies, calling them temples of the Holy Spirit and charging us to glorify God with our bodies.¹⁹ Bodies also can be a strong point of connection with Jesus for adolescent girls. For example, in talking about her struggles with anorexia, a girl said: "Maybe, like me, parts of [Jesus] were starving inside, and he knew what it felt like to have no control over your life except what you do with or to your body."²⁰ Jesus is like them, and Jesus rose again, even after great suffering and death. This is a hopeful message for girls who feel out of control.

We also need to empower our girls. The heart of empowerment is the cross. It is within suffering and death that Christ saves

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and justifies, not in a glorious battle. In the same way, girls can be empowered in their suffering towards action, even as life is overwhelming. Girls need to hear the promise that within their baptismal identities they are set free from bondage to physical appearance or attractiveness to men. Language of success and failure does not apply to them, for they are not justified or saved by their achievements. God's freely given grace has already justified and saved them, and they can do nothing to earn or lose this promise. They will learn that they can be "agents of their own social change," without men and without the trappings of designer clothing and perfect makeup.²¹ Instead, the garb entrusted to them is Christ, the gospel, and their faith granted by the Holy Spirit. Clothed in this new attire, and within their baptismal vocations, girls encounter real empowerment to enact personal and social change.

When girls are empowered, they can begin to explore healthy risk-taking. It is the unknown, the uncertainty of success, and the unanswered questions that are important for girls to experience in healthy, safe ways. With risk-taking, a girl will learn to trust herself, which will not only help her confidence in the short term, but also create resiliency and self-confidence to deal with difficulties as an adult. Risk-taking can also help build community. Girls who are empowered can find a common passion and set goals to create change within their community. Within empowerment and risk-taking, adolescent girls need strong adult female mentorship. Girls need female mentors who care about their authentic selves, model healthy behavior, and provide varied examples of strength and femininity. They need voices beyond their peers and the media to help shape them and listen to them.

Sharing stories from the Bible is another essential aspect of religious education for empowering adolescent girls. Many Bible stories, in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, depict brave, faithful women, whom we are privileged to lift up in Bible studies and sermons. For example, women such as Deborah, Martha, Elizabeth, and Hannah lived their faith, loved their God, and served their neighbor. Additionally, when no women are present in a story, we can ask where they might be and what they might be doing. The church can help girls imagine these women, encouraging them to research to discover what their lives were like and how they moved through the world.

Further, Jesus' treatment of women is a vital theme to explore with girls. He treats all women with love and respect. "In Jesus' society, women were 'the oppressed of the oppressed,' carrying the

17. Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia*, 20.

18. Guðmundsdóttir, *Meeting God on the Cross*, 19.

19. 1 Corinthians 6:19–20.

20. Dori Grinenko Baker, *Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-talk with Young Women* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005), 104.

21. Wiseman, *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, 13.

'double burden of low class and low gender status.'²² However, Jesus did not look down upon them or shun them, but rather ate and drank with them and appreciated them for their unique femininity. Jesus' treatment is more than kindness and setting a good example. His treatment of "the oppressed of the oppressed" offers a glimpse into the Reign of God, both here and now and yet to come. Indeed, "[b]y identifying with the Samaritan woman, the widow, the woman with the flow of blood, and the prostitute, Jesus revealed the true nature of the Reign of God, in which the last will be first and finally all injustice and suffering will be overcome."²³ The lives of girls are not lived in hopeless slumber, waiting for a prince, but rather in hopeful activity, empowered by the grace of God working in and through their lives, rejoicing in their divine Mother.

Conclusion

"Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."²⁴ These are words that adolescent girls need to hear from the Savior. Girls are bleeding, hemorrhaging their self-worth and status as daughters of the Lord. They are stricken with the diseases: the loss of self, authenticity, voice, and dignity; toxic social media and derogatory stereotypes perpetuated by the media at large; the objectifying gazes of men and boys; and unattainable standards of beauty, directly linked to notions of success.

However, all hope is not lost for adolescent girls and their futures. They are not alone and not abandoned by the God who created them and crafted them in God's own image. Sojourner Truth testified that "together women ought to be able to turn [the world] rightside up again." This is a beautiful thought, but it is not complete. Within this togetherness must be God, for without God the world certainly cannot be righted. It is in the crucified and risen Christ that girls find the Savior they so desperately need and who can right the world again.

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22. Guðmundsdóttir, *Meeting God on the Cross*, 135.

23. Ibid.

24. Mark 5:34.