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“Like a Girl”: Why our Words Matter

Abstract

"Did you see the Always #LikeAGirl Super Bowl XLIX commercial? Why does this commercial matter?"

Posting about how Christians should respond to the video/commercial #LikeAGirl and the phrase "like a girl" which can have a negative impact on the self-confidence of young girls from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/like-a-girl-why-our-words-matter>

The referenced video is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjJQBjWYDTs>

Keywords

In All Things, like a girl, gender, God, men, women, creation

Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College.

“Like a Girl”: Why our Words Matter

 [all in allthings.org/like-a-girl-why-our-words-matter](https://allthings.org/like-a-girl-why-our-words-matter)

Jason Lief

One of the more interesting commercials during this year’s Super Bowl asked both teenagers and young kids what it means to walk, throw, and fight “like a girl.” The point of the commercial is to suggest that something happens between childhood and adolescence that affects how boys and girls understand gender. When told to act “like a girl” the teenagers fell into gender stereotypes, while the younger girls focused on running, throwing, and fighting. So why does this matter?

Some argue that gender is closely related to biology, which means body parts and brain chemistry hard wire us for specific roles and cultural tasks. Others, however, see gender as socially constructed, believing that different communities give meaning to biological differences through language and cultural patterns that shape our understanding of gender by modeling what it means to be a man or a woman. As Christians influenced by the reformation we’re used to taking words seriously. We believe that God created (constructed?) reality by speaking—“And God said”—all things into existence. Early on in the biblical story we read about the struggle over the authority to speak words. In Genesis 11 we read about the Tower of Babel and how humans asserted the right to construct a way of life for the purpose of making “a name for ourselves.” Babel symbolizes the inward turn of sin as human beings imposed their own cultural experience as “objective reality” or the way the world should be.

In her book *Counseling Women*, Christie Neuger frames the issue of gender in a way that connects with the distorted culture of Babel. As a pastoral counselor she regularly hears about how words affect the way women and men experience gender. In particular, she sees how women are conditioned to interpret their own gendered identity through the lens of “male-ness”. Neuger describes how women lose their unique voice as they take on the dominant cultural view of gender that is shaped by a narrow view of male power.¹ This is what the “Like a Girl” commercial communicates—how susceptible we are to a Babel like cultural narrative that works very hard to “name” us.

In Genesis chapter 12 God calls Abraham in response to the problem of Babel. God tells Abraham, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great.”² God’s response to the oppressive culture of Babel was to claim a person and then a people through whom God would reveal God’s will for the world. God promises to make Abraham’s name great; Abraham’s identity is given to him, not by human effort or cultural categories, but by God’s grace. In his letter to the Galatians Paul challenges the ancient cultural categories that determined a person’s identity and his or her place in the social hierarchy. He writes, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”³ Paul uses the story of Abraham to remind the Galatians that in Jesus Christ God breaks open every cultural category humans use to define each other. He reminds them that they have been given a new name and a new identity. “So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.”⁴ As the Christian community we need to reclaim the power of our words to open young people to the presence of new creation in the world. We need to remind young people that the cultural categories that bombard us with messages about what it means to be male and female no longer hold power over us. Like Paul we are called to remind them of the Word God speaks in Jesus Christ, a Word that does not merely affirm the way things are, but calls us to live in the promise of new creation. This means cultivating a way of speaking about gender that celebrates and affirms the beautiful mystery of being made in the image of God, male and female, as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. This means helping young women and men discover their own unique voice in the

face of oppressive cultural stereotypes. This means taking our words seriously.

Footnotes

1. Neuger discusses a five step process to help explain how women lose their unique voice:
 - Humiliation – The demeaning and devaluing of female identity
 - Inculcation – Teaching the cultural rules about what it means to be female
 - Retribution – Punishment for breaking the cultural rules about what it means to be female
 - Conversion – Believing that what is taught about being female is true and natural
 - Conscription – Women persuading and converting other women into the patriarchal paradigm ↩
2. Genesis 12:2 ↩
3. Galatians 3:28 ↩
4. Galatians 4:7 ↩