# Barbie and Ken Go East of Eden

For Christians, Greta Gerwig’s latest film is an opportunity to reckon with the “fortunate fall.”

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Image: Courtesy of Warner Bros. Pictures

Questions about gender and sexuality plague the evangelical church, from the [SBC](https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2023/june/southern-baptist-women-pastor-church-leaders-meeting-sbc.html) to the [PCA](https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2023/june/presbyterian-church-in-america-abuse-response.html). Books on the topic are proliferating. In that context, it’s understandable that some folks see the new *Barbie* film as another volley in the gender wars. But Greta Gerwig’s latest project is far too layered to be read through a literalist hermeneutic.

Rather than offering a blind affirmation of feminism or a critique of patriarchy, the movie explores how we use ideology to bypass the messier work of growing as humans. The gender wars are not the plot so much as the setting. They shape the world in which Barbie and Ken pursue maturity.

Consider Ken’s character arc. Forever condemned to be “just Ken,” Barbie’s beau finds his identity through relationship to her. He “[simps](https://www.dictionary.com/e/slang/simp/),” or fawningly submits to her, by following her into the Real World. Once there, however, he catches a vision for a different life—one where men rule but more importantly feel *seen* and *valued*. Crediting this to The Patriarchy™, Ken carries the idea of male superiority back to Barbie Land as a shortcut to his own growth.

The movie tracks with Christine Emba’s [recent observations](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/07/10/christine-emba-masculinity-new-model/) that modern men are in “a widespread identity crisis—as if they didn’t know how to be.” This loss of self, she argues, is what fuels the popularity of [right-wing masculinity](https://www.politico.com/news/2023/07/10/2024-primary-masculinity-00105294) gurus from [Jordan Peterson](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/jordan-peterson-is-on-a-crusade-to-toughen-up-young-men-its-landed-him-on-our-cultural-divide/2018/05/02/c5bafe48-31d6-11e8-94fa-32d48460b955_story.html) to [Andrew Tate](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/jordan-peterson-is-on-a-crusade-to-toughen-up-young-men-its-landed-him-on-our-cultural-divide/2018/05/02/c5bafe48-31d6-11e8-94fa-32d48460b955_story.html). Those voices seem to offer young men a path forward. That it so often trends toward misogyny, as Ken’s own journey does, is only part of the point.

Eventually, Ken reckons with the roots of his discontent, which are less about social order and more about an abdication of self through posturing and performative identity.

Barbie’s journey, too, is directed away from gender stereotypes and toward mature personhood. But unlike Ken, who learns his own value, she learns to embrace her own imperfection.

When Barbie is inexplicably struck with thoughts of death and her heels drop to the floor, she seeks help from Weird Barbie, a guru-like outcast. In a scene that parallels *The Matrix*, Weird Barbie offers her a choice: She can either go back to non-reality, or she can move toward knowledge by taking on a quest in the Real World.

Instead of a blue pill or a red pill, however, she offers Barbie a pink high heel or a Birkenstock sandal (one that will accommodate her now-flat feet). Even though Barbie wants to pick the high heel and return to a state of ignorance, various questions and challenges force her to leave Barbie Land in search of answers.

Both Barbie and Ken venture beyond plastic tropes to discover their full (and sexed) humanity. While these existential questions are refreshing in a mainstream movie, the real magic is found in how they move toward maturity: through imperfection and mistake.

As *Vox* critic (and former CT columnist) [Alissa Wilkinson notes](https://www.vox.com/culture/23800753/barbie-review-bible-eden), the movie is a kind of retelling of the Fall. In both Genesis and *Barbie*, a prototypical woman reaches for forbidden knowledge and then offers it to her male companion. Both are met by a loss of innocence and exiled from perfection.

For evangelicals, framing maturation in light of original sin can be deeply unsettling, especially because Gerwig seems to suggest that experiential knowledge is necessary to human development. By contrast, we understand the Genesis narrative as a story of rebellion. In choosing what was forbidden, the woman and man disobey and come under a curse that will plague their entire existence—from the earth under their (flat) feet to their own bodies.

Even more, much of evangelical theology and practice is aimed at reversing this curse. We understand Jesus as the Second Adam, come to redeem and restore what was lost (Rom. 5:12–20). We look forward to the day when we are perfect once again.

And yet, within this frame, we sometimes overlook the *process* by which God sanctifies us. As we confess our sinfulness, we then convince ourselves that life with Christ will be an upward trending line of increasingly good performance that eventually results in perfection. Having begun by the Spirit, we’re pretty convinced we can continue in our own strength. But insofar as this approach to discipleship denies our humanity, we will struggle to live with our imperfection. As a counselor told me recently, “You’re not an angel, Hannah. You’re a human being.”

Here, theology can help us. While rightly understanding the Fall as a loss, theologians from Ambrose to Augustine to Aquinas to Wycliffe have also named it a “fortunate fall”—one that reveals God’s goodness in a way that human perfection cannot. As John Milton renders the idea in *Paradise Lost*,

O Goodness infinite, Goodness immense!
That all this good of evil shall produce,
And evil turn to good; more wonderful
Than that which creation first brought forth
Light out of darkness!

We do not sin that grace may abound (Rom. 6:1); and yet, grace abounds. Somehow God can take our failures and bring from them a richer, deeper understanding of both ourselves and his grace. In a divine irony, we only understand grace when we have need of it. Or as Jesus puts it in Luke 7:47, the one who has been forgiven little, loves little, while the one who is forgiven much, loves much.

In this way, sanctification requires that we leave behind plastic ways of being and embrace our God-given humanity, flawed as it is. It requires that we move from idealized forms to the complexity of embodied lives. It requires that we leave Barbie Land.

For Christians, this process is undergirded by Christ’s own incarnation, which affirmed the goodness of human existence even in a cursed world. And it’s secured by Christ’s death and resurrection, which offer both forgiveness and hope in the face of our failures.

As we embrace the imperfection of our lives, and as we accept a world marked by doubt, sin, and death, we do so confident in the reality of God’s love for us. In the end, it’s not our mistakes that make us whole but God who redeems our mistakes. It is God who, despite knowing our every weakness and disobedience, calls us to rest in his perfect obedience.

Or as a friend of mine put it recently, it is God who through Christ says to his faltering children, “I know exactly why you are *where* you are even more than you do. The reasons are even deeper than you know. And I am personally going to vouch for you. Just be.”

In this way, the love of God makes us real.

Hannah Anderson is the author of [Made for More](https://www.amazon.com/Made-More-Invitation-Live-Image/dp/0802410324/?tag=christtoday-20), [All That’s Good](https://www.amazon.com/All-Thats-Good-Recovering-Discernment/dp/0802418554/?tag=christtoday-20), and [Humble Roots: How Humility Grounds and Nourishes Your Soul](http://www.amazon.com/Humble-Roots-Humility-Grounds-Nourishes/dp/0802414591/?tag=christtoday-20).

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