

God & Gender Language

I am going to talk next about God and gender language. Some time ago now, I was watching a television program that revolved around a controversy in an evangelical seminary. One of the sub-plots of this story concerned the dismissal of a female professor. The story made it appear as though the professor was dismissed from the seminary because she disagreed with of a certain clique of theologians who were trying to take over the seminary and through the seminary, the denomination of that seminary. Further, it alleged that these theologians were really a bunch of reactionary conservatives. They were not preaching the Gospel. They were rather seeking to enforce a mean-spirited political agenda and an intolerant, arcane theology. Near the end of the story, however, in a very quick sound bite, someone representing the seminary actually enumerated the list of charges against the professor. These charges were the deviations from tradition that the professor was found guilty of committing. Among those was the fact that the professor refused to speak of God as Father. She preferred to speak of God as Mother, or as the Goddess.

I remember that as I was watching this program, I thought these events contained a certain irony. You see, we are a culture that prizes and protects means of address concerning ourselves. But it does not matter how we speak of God. What is important to us is not what we think and say about God's status, but rather our own status. We have rights. We proclaim them. We agitate for them. We protect them by statute. We seek redress when our rights are violated. But God has no rights among us, not even the right of His own name. The question we want to address this evening is this: does it matter what we call God? Does it really matter by what name we address God?

Many people today suggest that we can call God 'Mother' as well as 'Father.' They propose that we can speak of God as 'She' equally as legitimately as 'He.' Perhaps more radically, as suggested by some, we should avoid gender terms altogether. Thus God is not "Father," but "Divine Parent." He is not "King," but "Monarch." He is not "Father, Son, and Spirit," but rather "Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier." Well, why can we not use "Allah" or "Great Spirit," "the Goddess," or "Sophia" to refer to God? After all, God knows He is being addressed. Does it really matter what name we use? There is nothing magical about names. We could put it this way: "Lighten up, you fundamentalists. One name is as good as another."

But no, it is not. Names matter. Forms of address are important. They are important to each and every person in this room. Unless your name is Fred, when the phone rings and someone asks to speak to Fred, what do you say? "I am afraid you have the wrong number. You are not speaking to me." I myself do not answer to just any name. I do not answer to the name Dan. I refuse to answer to the name of Dan. It is not that there is anything wrong with the name Dan. Somebody on this planet has the name Dan, but not me. If you were to call me Dan, that tells me that you do not know me. Names are important to us. We are offended when our names are used inappropriately. We are hurt and offended when the names of others are used to apply to us. Is it possible that the same is true of God?

Let me change that from a purely rhetorical question to a proposition. God does not answer and He is offended when He is inappropriately addressed, when He is misnamed, and when He is mistaken for someone or something else. Amazingly, this is very easy to prove biblically. The God of Scripture is not a generic deity. He is not mankind's culturally-generated ideal of what a God should be like. Rather, He is who He declares Himself to be. And He refuses to answer to the names that He does not operate under. How can I say this? It is because repeatedly throughout Scripture, God warns us that He is not Baal. He is not to be confused with Molech. His name is not to be used in the same breath with Asherah. He answers only to His own name, the name that identifies Him, the name that He gives us to call upon

Him—in the Old Testament, Yahweh, and in the New Testament, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. But before we discuss this, I think it would be helpful to examine some of the reasons people typically advance today to argue that it really does not matter what we call God, or to suggest that we can and should use female names or androgynous terms to refer to God.

These are the arguments against the use of male names, titles, and pronouns. First of all, many people claim that they simply cannot relate to the male God of Scripture. And often the reason cited is abuse. The person's own father was absent. His or her own father was cruel, abusive, or indifferent. Or perhaps this concern comes from a frustration in the face of social injustice against women in a male-dominated church and society. The argument goes this way: moving away from male language in reference to God and re-imagining God as female or purging gender reference altogether, is a small but important step in bringing the Gospel to those people who have been victimized by males in their own experience. Focusing upon female images might redress the offence of the long history of the second-class status of women.

Let me respond to those arguments. I think it is important to hear such voices. I think it is important to empathize when people have been hurt by an overbearing patriarchal culture. I think it is important to seek justice when people have been spiritually wounded by sinful father figures. But quite simply, the agenda suggested in the argument is seriously flawed. After all, the biblical point is not that we identify with God as a gendered being but that we identify with God as personal being. It is not that we identify with Jesus as a gendered being but that we identify with Jesus as a human being. After all, how far can I take the issue of identity for the sake of relationship? May I, as a white person, claim that I cannot identify with a Jewish Savior? How far does God have to identify with me in order for me to relate with Him? Jesus was never middle-aged. I am. Jesus was a Jew, but I am from white, northern European stock. Where do I go to find a middle-aged, white, middle-class, professional deity? How can I possibly identify with the Jesus of history: a poor, young, Jewish carpenter? Certainly, our gender is part of us. It is important to us. I do not mean to trivialize it, but other aspects of our being are important to us as well: our language, our ethnic heritage, our education, our weight, our hairlines. Again, I do not mean to trivialize these things. I do not mean to trivialize gender. But we ought not to absolutize those aspects either. They are not the sole, or even the primary, indicator of persons.

By the way, I am going to admit from the very beginning that almost everything I am going to say in this lecture is a direct challenge to the way our culture presently is. I think that is okay. You see, most of the things I am going to say were assumed by Western culture until about the 1960's and the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. I believe that since that time, many of the things that are claimed by the feminist movement are claimed on an unproven authority. They are assumed to be true only because they claim that they are so. And quite frankly, what people need to do is stand up and say, "Prove it." It is not the case that the word 'male' is political simply because some proclaim that it is political. It was not assumed to be political before they claimed it as such, and we can say the same about many other things.

For instance, God is not all things to all people. He is who He is, and He demands that we deal with Him as He is. That is not a terribly provocative statement, because it is also true of me. I am who I am and I demand that you deal with me as I am, and so do you. You see, persons are not plastic; persons are not negotiable. Any person who has been married for a very short time knows that. At some point you find that you cannot turn that other person into the ideal person you would like him to be. You are going to have to live with him just as he is. Yes, women have been damaged by men in our culture. There has been prejudice in our culture against women and this historical and cultural sin cries out to be addressed. But the agenda suggested here, that we simply start calling God "Mother," is the wrong tool for the job.

It will not fix what is wrong with our culture. And this is so because God's identity is not about us. God's identity is about Him.

The key question here in relation to the critique of biblical and traditional language for God is whether that language necessarily leads to gender oppression, or whether this admittedly tragic effect results from an abuse of biblical language concerning God. Medieval theologians put it this way: the abuse of the thing does not destroy its legitimacy or its proper use. Mary Daley's now famous and sarcastic aphorism holds that, since God is male, 'the male is God.' This, however, is both logically and theologically false. The dominance of masculine names, similes, and metaphors in Scripture does not legitimate essential domination of women by men. The Old Testament condemns the worship of either a male principle, the Baal, or a female principle, the Asherah. Whenever we males equate ourselves with God, we slide into idolatry. Quite simply, biblical religion condemns the abuse of God-language in the service of the oppression and exploitation of women.

How do we address the abuse of women in our culture? We are not going to address it appropriately by re-gendering God. We are not going to address it appropriately by abolishing God's fatherhood. One way we may appropriately address it is to let God's fatherhood rehabilitate our broken and sinful images of fatherhood, manhood, and womanhood. Only a good father can judge and correct a bad one. You cannot fix anything by running away from it.

A second argument that people use is the claim that we need to move toward more feminine images or inclusive language for God because it was men who translated our Bibles. For the most part, men have been the interpreters of Scripture. Men wrote our creeds, and men are responsible for our theological history. It is true that the translation of Scripture and the historical tradition of interpretation has been undertaken largely by males, but the dominance of biblical imagery in our Bibles simply cannot be traced to this reality. Rather, the dominance of male language in our translations and our interpretive history is due to the fact that male language for God is all but universal in Scripture.

I think that women should study theology and women should study interpretive arts. Women have as much insight to offer as males do, and often women can correct gender bias when it actually appears. There is a difference, however, between bias and honest exegesis. If the Bible says that God is something, for example, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we should have the honesty and we should have the passion for the truth that allows us to affirm that truth, no matter what our biases are. We should not use the Word of God to serve our biases. One of the very purposes for His Word is to adjust our biases, crush our biases, and replace our biases with its bias. Remember that we have talked about this before: the biblical God will and should offend us. He calls every human self-absolutization a lie. God says, "No," to every attempt to find ultimate meaning in intra-creational or intra-historical reality. He does not say, "Be you male, for I am male," but He does say, "Be you holy, for I am holy." And that holiness relativizes all of us, male and female alike.

The third argument claims that masculine names and terms for God in the Bible are historically and culturally conditioned, and as such, they are not what God intends to teach the church. Given the reality that these things are simply the historical packaging of the biblical message, they can be laid aside. It is true that the gender language of Scripture is historically and culturally conditioned, but how do we move easily from that insight to the claim that this language is peripheral or dismissible? You see, everything is historically and culturally conditioned. We have not said much when we make that claim. On what basis are we to decide that this bit of revelation is not transcultural but is rather the negligible packaging of an archaic age or culture? At best, this is a kind of cultural elitism, saying we know better now than they did then. At worst, this is a denial of the full inspiration and authority of Scripture. Is there some

ideal that is inspired in the text, and you and I are free to decide what that ideal is? Of course, when we decide the ideal, we also decide what is unimportant and we are free to dismiss it. What we do when we engage in this kind of picking and choosing is to completely ignore the fact that we and our prejudices and our biases are also historically and culturally conditioned.

One might point to the inherent difficulties of language, and here I want to return to our discussion about metaphors and our discussion about transcendence. Many people will say that it is impossible to describe God in human language. It is commonly asserted that the biblical language describing God is analogical in character. Remember, an analogy says, "This is like that." But analogical language presupposes a degree of equivocation, a degree of dissimilarity. An analogy says, "This is like that," but it is also saying, "This is not that." That is an important distinction. While these two things might share some attributes, they are not the same. Thus it is suggested that mere human language cannot do justice to the infinite. The reality of God's transcendence means that any attempt to describe God will be, at best, a vague approximation of God's own reality. When we fail to recognize this, we inevitably fall into the idolatry of what is called "Biblicism." Thus, when the Bible tells us that God is a King or a Judge or a Father, these descriptions are to be understood as metaphors rather than as actual depictions of who and what God is. And since metaphor only approximates correspondence or establishes a purely semantic or functional correspondence, these declarations are not to be taken too literally. Some theologians say that if metaphors are really imperfect ways of talking about things, we can help our analogies with other analogies, or we can trade off analogies. If God is not actually a King or a Father, but is only somehow king-like or father-like, we might want to use other analogies of our own making. God is mother-like as well. But this entire line of discussion, I think, is faulty, and it is faulty because it is based upon the view of God's transcendence which is intentionally meant to cast doubt upon Scripture's ability to speak truthfully and meaningfully about God. If I could summarize the argument, I would put it this way: the infinite cannot be captured in the finite, and therefore all language about God is equivocal. That may be true to a point, but it is also false, and it is false at least to the extent that it is true.

Is that what we find when we go to the Bible? No. We do not find a deity who is vaguely judge-like. We do not find a God who merely approximates some characteristics of kingship. We do not find a God who is said to be fatherly in some contexts, as if God is none of those things, but only appears to be something like them. What is a king? A king is a person who exercises dominion over subjects or a realm. God does the things a king does. God is an actual king. What is a judge? A judge is a person who makes critical decisions about guilt and innocence. God does the things a judge does. God is an actual judge. What is a father? A father is a person who gives life to another and then cares for, protects, nourishes, directs, and exercises authority over that other person in a familial context. God does those things. God is Father. He does not merely appear to be or appear to do these things. Scripture's proclamation of God as King, Judge, and Father are not metaphors. They are actual declarations. Now to be sure, God transcends those declarations. Even God's fatherhood infinitely transcends our idea of fatherhood. The point of biblical language is that God is always more than what is written about Him, not less. Even God's fatherhood is more than what is there. There is no reason to demean, deny, or dismiss the biblical language of divine fatherhood on linguistic or semantic grounds.

The fourth argument is that there are feminine or maternal images in Scripture as well as masculine images, and the presence of these feminine images legitimate feminine references for God. Thus, we can call God Mother equally as validly as Father. It is true that there are feminine images in Scripture, but the reality is that there are exceedingly few. Some of them are Isaiah 42:14, which speaks of God crying out like a mother in labor, and Isaiah 49:15 in which God is likened to a nursing mother. Psalm 131:2 says the same thing. Isaiah 66:13 also likens God to a mother who comforts her child. Matthew 23:37

speaks of God who acts like a hen who gathers her chicks under her wings. Deuteronomy 32:11-12 likens God to a nesting eagle that hovers over its young. And Hosea 13:8 pictures God as a bear robbed of her cubs. I may have missed one or two, but only one or two. I mentioned a number of the apparent references here only because it is generally assumed or at least generally intimated in some circles that feminine images for God are rather common in Scripture. The fact is, for those who want to make that argument, they are embarrassingly rare. I may not have listed them all, but there are fewer than ten of them in the entire Scriptures. But far more important than the number of feminine images is that not all imagery is equal. All the feminine references to God are figures of speech, metaphors and similes. If you take the list I have supplied and read through them, you will often see language like, “like.” You will often read the words “like” or “as” in the English translation of these texts. That is the language of analogy, the language of comparison. None of these texts provide or authorize a divine name. And a figure of speech is not equivalent to a name. You can use a feminine figure of speech to apply to me. An example of one that is not feminine, but it gets to the point another way, would be after a test next week, a student might want to refer to me as “a real bear,” but that figure of speech will never identify me in the same way that “Mike” will, or “Dr. Williams.” And surely, referring to me as a bear will not authorize or license that student to bump into me in the hallway and then call me “Dr. Bear.” To name God “Mother” on the basis of a few feminine similes is to confuse functions of language. It is to confuse simile and reference. Feminine images do not justify attributing feminine names to God.

In fact, naming God Mother may be a violation of the third commandment, a commandment which protects God’s name. Exodus 20:7 says, “You shall not misuse the name of Yahweh your God, for Yahweh will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses His name.” Notice how God is protecting His name there. He is saying that He has a name and it had better be used correctly. You see, in the Bible, human beings do not name God. We do not have the right to name God. Rather, He names Himself. He reveals His name, and He jealously protects that name. When God encountered Moses on Mt. Sinai and commissioned him to go to Egypt to seek the release of Israel from slavery, Moses wanted to know who was talking to him. Who should he say is sending him? Well, God did not say that it did not matter and Moses could give the people just any name. And God did not say, “Tell them it was the Big Guy in the sky.” As a matter of fact, in his very question, Moses identified God as the God of the fathers, yet that was insufficient. God told Moses a name—Yahweh. God named Himself Yahweh. Naming someone or something presupposes a kind of authority, a kind of power over it. For example, my wife and I have two sons. We named them. No one else had the right, and no one else had the authority to do so. When God created man, He gave them the authority to name the animals, and yes, He gave Adam the authority to name the one taken from his side, Eve. But God named Adam, and God names Himself. Giving God names that He does not authorize is not a mark of worship, nor a mark of intimacy, but it is in fact a mark of hubris. It is a mark of false familiarity. In short, “She Who is Our Mother in Heaven” is not a God of Scripture. She is a false God, a graven image, an idol. She is a creature of our making.

Why protect the name? It is because names have content. Names have meaning. In the biblical world, names meant something. They revealed character, and if you recall our discussion of Yahweh, this name speaks of God’s essential character. It is important for us to return and to be reminded that, contrary to the modern depiction of the God of Scripture as distant, officious, vindictive, judgmental, warlike, and authoritarian, Yahweh does not present Himself that way. Yahweh is the God who relates to His people in intimate, caring and active ways. By announcing His name as Yahweh, God pledges His presence with and His protection over His covenant people. He commits His love to them. In the context in which the divine name is first given in Exodus, it is clear that God wants Moses and Israel to understand that He cannot be confused with the deities of Egypt, those deities who were decidedly remote, unapproachable, impersonal, and authoritarian. Yahweh is the one who is there for His people.

Let us go to the issue of particularity. The real complaint today is over the term ‘father.’ This is the name that is most offensive of all. After all, it is from the word ‘father’ that we get such hated terms a “patriarchal” and “paternalistic.” This is the male God of classic patriarchy. We are told today that we can speak of God as ‘Mother,’ because ‘Father’ is simply an archaic designation. Our sexually egalitarian culture knows that one is as good as another. We can lay ‘father’ aside without any loss of meaning, without losing the central truth of what is being communicated. Unfortunately, today a number of evangelical theologians are following just this kind of reasoning. Since God is Spirit, we can speak of Him as Mother equally as well as Father. Or perhaps we should seek to de-gender God altogether and not use any gender references. I trust you can tell where I am going here, and that I am uncomfortable with this vague de-gendering approach.

I say this because “Father” is the New Testament name for the first person of the trinity, in exactly the same way that “Jesus” is the name of the second person, and “Holy Spirit” is the name of the third. The name “Father” is the privileged reference for the first person in the New Testament. Jesus came as the Son of God the Father. He addressed the first person as “Father” and He taught us to do the same in the Lord’s Prayer. Does all that mean that the Bible is patriarchal? If we mean by that term the dominance of men over women, no. But if we mean the sovereign fatherhood of God over all, yes. I say this because, if anything, Jesus exaggerated the divine patriarchy that we see in Scripture. Jesus referred to God as Father no less than 160 times, and it is the only thing He ever called Him. Actually, there is one time He did not. It was in the cry of dereliction: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Of course, that is a quotation from the Old Testament. Other than that, Jesus always spoke of God as Father.

If you think about it, could Jesus have spoken about God as Mother? What do you think? Would that not have been to confuse God with Mary? When He used the word “mother,” it would have had a natural reference. It would have referred to Mary. We have to be honest and say that the word “father” is applied to God relatively infrequently in the Old Testament. There, the divine name is primarily Yahweh. But in the New Testament, Yahweh is differentiated into three persons and the Christian tradition has always, and I think rightly, interpreted the divine name in the New Testament to be the Father, the Son who is Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. See for example Matthew 29:18 in which Jesus instructed His disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Some people might object that “Father,” is not a name. It is a title. But just what is a name? According to Thomas Aquinas, a name signifies “that whereby a person is distinguished from all other persons.” In other words, a name is a standard form of reference or address with unique personal reference. A name means “that person.” A name means “that one.” And the fact is, titles often do and can become names. The word ‘Christ’ was originally a title. It comes from a Hebrew word for one who is anointed, ‘messiah,’ but Paul applies the name “Christ” in the same way that he applies the name “Jesus.” It has a single, unique reference—“Christ” refers only to Jesus.

Let us go back to “Father.” Maybe we can make our point with this one. To my four-year-old son Sawyer, if you were to ask him what my name is, I doubt he would say “Mike” or “Michael.” He would say, “Daddy.” To him, “Daddy” is my proper name because for him, its referent is me. It means exactly the same person as the name Mike. Titles can become names, and in Sawyer’s use of “Daddy,” it is a very intimate name indeed.

But let me use the example of Jesus here, the second person of the trinity. This starts to get at the fact that the issue is not gender, but particularity. Scripture tells us that Jesus was fully human, even normatively human. And one of the realities of being human was the possession of sexually

differentiated reproductive organs. In other words, Jesus was a male. He was not a female. He was not both, and He was not neither. To have been both or neither would have meant that He was not normatively human. His being male, however, does not for a second glorify the male over the female. Nor does it make the female less than the male. What it does do is affirm us as a gendered species. If we refer to Jesus as an “it” rather than a “him,” or a “her” rather than a “him,” it would not merely de-gender Him, but it would also de-particularize and de-personalize Him, because it would deny the historical reality of who He is. The same is true of the Father. We linguistically use gender as a term of personhood, not just sexual differentiation. No person is an “it.” We are all either a “he” or a “she.” Think here of an infant. You might think of an infant as an “it” for a while, but as soon as it starts demonstrating its personhood, its personality, you will no longer speak of him or her as an “it.” Check out your own experiences. This is exactly how we function with infants. We will speak of them as “its” for a while, but not for very long. Personhood always comes with gender identification, but Scripture gives us no ground for speaking of God as an “it.” And it gives no ground for speaking of God as “she.”

I am not suggesting that God has sexually differentiated parts. God possesses no fleshly body. The issue of Father, the name for God, is not a matter of affirmation of sexuality, as important as that is for our culture. It is really a matter of God’s personal particularity. You see, like any person, God can be known only as He actually is, only as He reveals Himself by His actions and His words. And throughout Scripture, God is revealed and is depicted as male.

In his book *The Battle for the Trinity*, Donald Bloesch gives a helpful illustration. In a manuscript, he wrote the phrase, “God reveals Himself.” But when that manuscript went off to the editor, it was returned with this edit, “God is revealed.” Note what the editor did. He changed the phrase from a reflexive to a passive. Instead of God revealing Himself, God is revealed. And the editor changed the statement from the personal to the impersonal. Bloesch rightly objected. Things are revealed because things are not agents, not persons. Persons act. At the beginning of his book *God the Almighty*, Bloesch claims that while God is the ground for both male and female, He has chosen to reveal Himself as masculine, as Father, Son, Spirit. He says, “God will remain ‘He’ because He is personal and the substitution of the noun ‘God’ for the personal pronoun invariably ends up in an impersonal God.” That is really the issue: God is personal and He is particular. The same problem faces any attempt to think of God as Mother, for as Bloesch concludes, outside of a specific gender identification, God would have no personal specificity for us, and we simply lack the grounds for speaking of divine motherhood.

The 17th century mathematician, philosopher, and lay theologian Blaise Pascal once said that even if one could not by irrefutable proof decide whether or not God exists, atheism would still be a fool’s bet. You see, even if we cannot prove that God exists, we should believe He does. Why? If the atheist loses his bet, he loses. If he wins his bet, he still loses. Following Pascal’s notion of the fool’s wager, calling God “Mother” is a fool’s bet. It presupposes that we have the right to define or describe who or what God is. If we have such a right, if we can do that, then the word “God” has no referent. It has only a sociological, political force or power. Such a deity is decidedly underwhelming theologically, for it is no more than the lifeless, voiceless block of wood that bears our own face. Read Isaiah 44. You cannot offend that god. You cannot listen to its voice. You cannot be criticized by it. You cannot be held accountable to it. You cannot enjoy a relationship with it, and you most certainly cannot be redeemed by it. Quite frankly, I think this is what stands behind a lot of the “re-imaging” movement. If we can do this with God, we do not stand under God’s authority. God stands under our authority. We no longer feel the bite of either God’s moral censure or His call to redemption. This is precisely why the historical, personal particularity of God is so crucially important. He is the God who acts. He is not the thing made in our image. He is the sovereign God of the universe, who crafts us male and female in His image, a

personal image. And only this personal God can hold us accountable. Only a personal God can speak so that we hear His voice.