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Inclusive Liturgical Language: Off-Ramp to Apostasy?

Paul J. Grime

The preparation of a new hymnal for The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod presented the Commission on Worship with a wide array of issues that required ongoing attention. Hymn choices, lectionary revisions, rubrical details—the list was endless. No issue, however, caused as much angst, not to mention heated response, as did the matter of inclusive language. More specifically, it was the commission's work on the translation of the Nicene Creed that garnered the greatest outpouring of comments. Points of contention included the familiar "Christian Church" vs. "catholic Church" as well as the opening phrase "I believe" vs. "We believe." Most problematic, though, was the phrase "who for us men and for our salvation." In an attempt to ascertain the mind of the Synod, the Commission conducted a survey via the Internet in early 2003 and proposed a substitute for the word "men" so as to render the phrase "who for us *humans* and for our salvation." That the trial balloon was shot down in no time came as no surprise.

Political correctness, "P. C." as it is widely known, has been with us for some time,¹ though the fact that many of us can still remember when this was not that big of an issue ought to tell us something. On college campuses we have had three, maybe four, decades of the P. C. police sniffing out unnecessary masculine pronouns from term papers, theses, and dissertations. Never mind that such attempts at not giving offense frequently result in a frontal assault on the English language such that English teachers ought to rise up and revolt!

In the last half century, there have been significant changes in liturgical language. The move in the Roman Catholic Church from the Latin Mass to the vernacular following the Second Vatican Council certainly played a significant role. Imagine trying to craft a new liturgical language

¹ Gail Ramshaw-Schmidt, "De Divinis Nominibus: The Gender of God," *Worship* 56 (1982): 117–131.

Paul J. Grime is Associate Professor of Pastoral Ministry and Missions and Dean of the Chapel at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana.

in the 1960s when the pop culture was pumping out memorable lines like “He ain’t heavy, he’s my brother.” Protestant churches were not far behind in revising their liturgical language as well, and included in those revisions was the push toward inclusive language, mostly with respect to the way we spoke of fellow humans. Given that it was the age of sexual equality, that should not come as a surprise. For Lutherans in America, this re-adjustment was readily apparent with the publication of *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978) and then with the LCMS revision, *Lutheran Worship* (1982). There was nothing too radical about the changes, which consisted mostly of replacing words like “man” and “sons.”

Returning to the Nicene Creed, the phrase “for us men” became an early target in the push toward inclusivity. Even as the Roman Catholics were rolling out their first vernacular iterations of the Mass, Protestant churches were attempting to develop common translations of key liturgical texts. In 1975, the International Consultation on English Texts (ICET) published the fruits of its labors in the document *Prayers We Have in Common*.² This document was later revised by the successor body, the English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC), in their 1988 publication, *Praying Together*.³ In both of these documents, the revised text for the Nicene Creed omits the word “men.” In the accompanying notes, the Consultation states that the word “men” “is increasingly misleading or excluding as tied to only one gender.”⁴ That brief explanation pretty well summed up the argument for making the liturgical adjustment: the word “man” was no longer understood in its generic sense and thus excluded more than half of the human race.

But is it true that “man” is no longer understood generically? Paul Mankowski, a Jesuit priest and one-time frequent contributor to *First Things*, begs to differ. In two insightful articles published in *Touchstone* magazine in 1994 and 2001, he argues that if the word “man” has lost its generic sense, then cognitive errors ought to occur when the older language is still used. As an absurd example, he offers up this scenario: suppose an apprentice female zookeeper is going about her daily rounds of feeding the animals. As she comes upon one particular cage, a warning sign confronts her: CAUTION: MAN-EATING TIGER. Because she is not a

² International Consultation on English Texts, *Prayers We Have in Common*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975). These are the texts that are used in Settings One and Two in the *Lutheran Service Book*, having been used previously in both *LBW* and *LW*.

³ English Language Liturgical Consultation, *Praying Together* (Norwich, England: The Canterbury Press, 1988).

⁴ *Praying Together*, 12.

man, is she safe to assume that she can enter the cage with impunity?⁵ No matter how politically correct this zookeeper might fashion herself, she would know full well what the phrase “man-eating” meant and would not dare enter the cage without taking the necessary precautions. Indeed, her correct reading of the word “man” in the generic sense would be so spontaneous and natural that the irony of the situation would likely escape her!

Mankowski goes on to posit another proof that the word “man” has not lost its generic sense. Calling it the “naïve” use, he suggests that when the day comes that children on the playground instinctively avoid the use of masculine pronouns when speaking generically of both boys *and* girls, then we will know that the generic meaning has in fact been lost.⁶

Mankowski nicely summarizes what he believes is at work in the push for inclusive language. He writes:

“Man,” “he,” etc., have precisely the same range of *meaning* today that they had in 1975 and 1675. No pertinent change has occurred in the language *per se*. What has changed is the social and political valence of the generic employment of these expressions; a taboo (that is, a supra-linguistic phenomenon, external to the grammar of the speaker) has been attached to the generic usage.

To put it bluntly, Mankowski continues, the generic use of “man” has been “stigmatized for political reasons.” When it is used today, “it is met not with confusion but rather with resentment.”⁷

So why did the Commission on Worship propose an alternate wording in its field-test proposal of the Nicene Creed? Prior to this proposal, the Liturgy and Translations Committees had done considerable research on this matter. In a study document drafted by Thomas Winger, they noted that “concerns have been raised that it is difficult for many women today to hear the phrase ‘who for us *men*’ as referring to them and that some, in fact, take offense at being asked to confess these words.”⁸ Note the language: “difficult to hear” and “take offense.” Nowhere did the committees concede that the meaning of the word had changed; rather, the explanation gives a nod to the reality that in certain quarters some have been conditioned to “hear” the word as being exclusive.

⁵ Paul V. Mankowski, S.J., “Jesus: Son of Humankind,” *Touchstone* 14, no. 8 (2001): 34. See also “A Fig Leaf for the Creed,” *Touchstone* 7, no. 2 (1994): 11–14.

⁶ Mankowski, “Jesus: Son of Humankind,” 34.

⁷ Mankowski, “Jesus: Son of Humankind,” 33–34.

⁸ *Lutheran Service Book Historical Records*, vol. 4: *Other Documents*, compiled by Paul J. Grime and Jon D. Vieker (St. Louis: Commission on Worship, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2007), 551.

But is that true? Digging deeper into the linguistic underpinnings of this debate, Mankowski offers another example. Consider the following sign:



It is difficult to imagine anyone mistaking the intention of this sign: don't litter. Though the symbol for the person is the same that is often used to indicate the male gender (just think of the signage on nearly every men's restroom), in this context the meaning is clear: don't litter—men or women. Now consider this sign:



Whereas the first sign was "unmarked" as to gender, the second sign is marked for gender. To see it in this context introduces confusion, or, at the very least, bewilderment.

Just as the first sign clearly communicates that the littering prohibition applies to all people, so does the use of the words "man" and "men" in specific contexts. Consider a few familiar examples from our hymnody:

Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns!
Let men their songs employ (*LSB* 387:2).

Then why should men on earth be so sad,
Since our Redeemer made us glad (*LSB* 377:2).

God is man, man to deliver (*LSB* 360:2).

Born that man no more may die (*LSB* 380:3).

Pleased as Man with man to dwell,
Jesus, our Immanuel (*LSB* 380:2).

In the case of several of these examples, one finds a rather poetic use of the word "man." There really would be no other way, for example, of saying "God is man, man to deliver" without butchering the elegance of the line. Similarly, while many hymnals, including *Lutheran Worship*, have revised the last of these examples, which is from "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" by replacing "man" with "us," that threefold rhyme of the original rightfully demands to be preserved ("Man with *man* . . . Immanuel").

As the Hymnody and Translations committees worked their way through each of the hymns for *Lutheran Service Book*, they were sensitive to the issue of inclusive language. Where hymns had previously been updated to remove words like "man," the committees sometimes recommended a return to the original version, such as is seen in the preceding examples. While the literary quality of the texts was of some concern, a more significant theological issue was also at stake, which was well articulated by Leonard Klein already in the late 1980s:

[O]ne change may present more problems than some have thought, and that is the dropping of the term "man" for the human race. Not only does the term still merit consideration because it is widely used in a number of sciences and elsewhere as the name for the species, but in scientific theology as well it would seem to have a function that cannot be supplanted by the collective "people" or the abstractions "humankind" and "humanity." Theologically "man" means the adamic whole, the rebellious one who stands over against God as his enemy. Martin Franzmann put it well: "In Adam we have all been one, one huge rebellious man" (*LBW* 372). We have a solidarity in our sin and in our redemption by the second Adam that is watered down and obfuscated by more collective or abstract terms. Thus it is arguable that theology must continue to have not a doctrine of *humanity* but a doctrine of *man*, however we may choose to talk about the race in liturgy and preaching.⁹

I will admit that the phrase in question in the Nicene Creed is probably in a category all its own. I can think of no other place where the words "us" and "men" appear together. I imagine it is a double whammy for some women in our congregations not only to refer to themselves as "men" but to say "us men." It is admittedly clumsy. But to argue that the meaning of the phrase is at all unclear is intellectually dishonest. As Paul Mankowski explains:

In linguistic terms, there is no such thing as inclusive or exclusive

⁹ Leonard Klein, "That God Is to Be Spoken of as 'He,'" *Lutheran Forum* 22 (Pentecost 1988): 23.

language. Language is a vehicle of thought, capable of being steered in any direction by any speaker.

The project that is termed “inclusive language” is in fact an etiquette. As an etiquette it is a complex system of rules, mainly prohibitions, used to encourage certain attitudes and types of behavior and discourage others, and to allow those who accept a particular code of conduct to recognize both conformists and non-conformists. This etiquette operates in the service of feminism in the broadest sense; to adopt inclusive language is to signal, if not personal agreement with specific feminist claims, at least a personal unwillingness to risk social unpleasantness resulting from rejection of such claims.¹⁰

To that end, the little explanation that the commission included at the end of the creed in *Lutheran Service Book*, stating that the phrase “*us men* means all people” was, while certainly well-meaning, perhaps a disservice in that what it actually does is insult the intelligence of anyone who is willing to read the phrase honestly within its context.

Thus far I have focused exclusively on the horizontal direction where language is directed toward other human beings. Of far greater contention in recent years has been the application of inclusive language principles to the vertical dimension, namely, the relationship between God and man. As vexing as language can be when describing the horizontal relationship, language that addresses God is far more consequential.

That the debate over inclusive language moved from the horizontal to the vertical dimension should not have surprised anyone.¹¹ Already in the mid-1980s, the National Council of Churches produced an inclusive-language lectionary that radically altered the biblical text in order to eliminate masculine references not only to humans but also to God. At the time, reactions were strongly negative, even in many of the mainline churches. As one member of the committee that prepared this lectionary summarized, “A quiet revolution is under way all around us, the *Lectionary* is lending it strong support in the church, and Christians of all stripes are perplexed

¹⁰Mankowski, “Jesus, Son of Humankind,” 37. Elsewhere, he writes even more bluntly: “The concept of inclusivity (as its partisans would have us understand it) is a phantasm, a category mistake, a chimera buzzing in a vacuum. Exclusion and inclusion have a political valence, but not a linguistic one, and the attempt to pretend otherwise is itself a politically motivated fraud In sum: inclusive language is a fraud. It may be a pious fraud, although I am inclined to think otherwise. In neither case does it make our thought more precise; in neither case does God’s love for us shine more clearly through Sacred Scripture and sacred worship.” Mankowski, “A Fig Leaf for the Creed,” 11, 14.

¹¹Klein, “That God Is to Be Spoken of as ‘He,’” 23.

about what tactics to use to prevent its further advance.”¹²

The primary culprits, of course, are those pesky masculine pronouns “he,” “his,” and “him.” The ELLC document *Praying Together* lists several ways to avoid them. One is simply to repeat the word “God.” Thus, we have, “Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God’s people on earth.” The name “God” can show up multiple times in the same sentence. In extreme cases, the reflexive pronoun “himself” might even be rendered “Godself.” Commenting on this particular attempt at avoiding the masculine pronouns in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s 2006 hymnal, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW), Dan Biles throws up his hands, saying that it is just plain silly: “No one talks this way in real life.”¹³ More significant is the historical perspective into which Biles places the ELCA’s most recent hymnal:

It was the achievement and principle of Martin Luther to put the scriptures and liturgy in the language of the people. ELW has undone all that. ELW’s language is surely not the language people use from day to day. It is a construct, a farce, a charade of the beauty of the English language and the classical liturgy of the Church.¹⁴

Another way of avoiding the use of masculine pronouns—an approach championed by the ELLC—is to change from active to passive voice. An example from the last line of the Magnificat will suffice:

| ESV | ICET (1975); ELLC (1988) |
|--|--|
| as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever. | the promise made to our forebears, to Abraham and his children for ever. |

While the ELLC document argues that the Scriptures themselves use this form in various places, it cautions that such an approach should be used sparingly, only when it is evident to “a modern reader that the active subject is God.”¹⁵

¹² Burton H. Throckmorton, “Why the Inclusive Language Lectionary,” *Christian Century* 101 (Aug. 1–8, 1983): 742.

¹³ Dan Biles, “ELW and the Abuse of Language,” *Lutheran Forum* 41, no. 1 (2007): 40.

¹⁴ Biles, “ELW and the Abuse of Language,” 41.

¹⁵ *Praying Together*, xiii. Commenting on the dangers of this approach, Marcel Dumais writes, “The first consists in changing the verb in the sentence from the active to the passive. For example, ‘He [God] has saved us’ (Titus 3:5) would become ‘We have been saved.’ We grasp with little difficulty that something is lost in this kind of translation. Indeed, the action of God in salvation is no longer expressed.” “Sexist Language and Biblical Translations,” *Liturgical Ministry* 1 (Fall 1992): 130.

Yet another approach is simply to omit the masculine pronoun, with the result that sentences appear at times to be incomplete. Consider the Invitatory to the Venite in Morning Prayer. In *LBW*, as well as *LW* and *LSB*, the congregation responds: "Oh, come, let us worship him." In *ELW*, however, the editors simply omit the object of the verb and add a second verb in its place: "Oh, come, let us worship and praise." The natural question to ask upon singing this response might be, "worship and praise *whom?*"

Finally, there are some who advocate a more novel approach, namely, that of converting third-person speech into direct second-person address. The ELLC actually put this into practice in its 1988 document *Praying Together* by providing alternate versions of both the Benedictus and the Magnificat, the two canticles where masculine pronouns are in abundance. A quick comparison of the earlier and later textual revisions nicely demonstrates how this particular approach was applied to speech about God. Consider these two versions of the Magnificat:¹⁶

| ICET (1975) | ELLC (1988) |
|---|---|
| 1 My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, | My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, |
| 2 my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; | my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, |
| 3 for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant. | <u>who</u> has looked with favor on <i>his</i> lowly servant. |
| 4 From this day all generations will call me blessed: | From this day all generations will call me blessed: |
| 5 the Almighty has done great things for me, | the Almighty has done great things for me |
| 6 and holy is his Name. | and holy is <i>his</i> name. |
| 7 He has mercy on those who fear him | <u>God</u> has mercy on those who fear <i>him</i> , |
| 8 in every generation. | from generation to generation. |
| 9 He has shown the strength of his arm, | <u>The Lord</u> has shown strength with <i>his</i> arm |
| 10 he has scattered the proud in their conceit. | and scattered the proud in their conceit, |

¹⁶ All ICET and ELLC texts cited in the following discussion are drawn from *Prayers We Have in Common* and *Praying Together*.

| | |
|---|--|
| 11 He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, | casting down the mighty from their thrones |
| 12 and has lifted up the lowly. | and lifting up the lowly. |
| 13 He has filled the hungry with good things, | <u>God</u> has filled the hungry with good things |
| 14 and the rich he has sent away empty. | and sent the rich away empty. |
| 15 He has come to the help of his servant Israel | <i>He</i> has come to the aid of <i>his</i> servant Israel, |
| 16 for he has remembered his promise of mercy, | to remember the promise of mercy, |
| 17 the promise he made to our fathers, | the promise made to our forebears, |
| 18 to Abraham and his children for ever. | to Abraham and <i>his</i> children for ever. |

In the 1975 version, there was no attempt to tamper with the vertical dimension. But that was not the case with the 1988 version. There are three things to note in this later revision.

1. The pronouns in boldface in the 1975 version are avoided in the later version without being replaced by anything else.
2. The underlined words in the 1988 version indicate places where the masculine pronoun has been replaced with words like "God," "Lord," or the relative pronoun "who."
3. The words in italics in the 1988 version identify places where the masculine pronoun has been retained.

In sum, sixteen masculine pronouns are reduced to seven through a variety of translation techniques.¹⁷

Now we will compare the ELLC version of the Magnificat, previously in the right-hand column, with the alternate version, also prepared by the ELLC and used in *ELW*, in which the third-person discourse is changed to second-person direct address.

¹⁷ What is puzzling is that the consultation did not try to eliminate all of the masculine pronouns. An unintended consequence of this approach is that the sparing use of these pronouns actually calls greater attention to the masculinity of God, since when they occur, they tend to stand out as more pronounced.

| ELLC (1988) | ELLC (1988)—alternate version ELW |
|--|--|
| 1 My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, | My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, |
| 2 my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, | my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, |
| 3 <u>who</u> has looked with favor on <i>his</i> lowly servant. | for you , Lord, have looked with favor on your lowly servant. |
| 4 From this day all generations will call me blessed: | From this day all generations will call me blessed: |
| 5 the Almighty has done great things for me | you , the Almighty, have done great things for me |
| 6 and holy is <i>his</i> name. | and holy is your name. |
| 7 <u>God</u> has mercy on those who fear <i>him</i> , | You have mercy on those who fear you , |
| 8 from generation to generation. | from generation to generation. |
| 9 <u>The Lord</u> has shown strength with <i>his</i> arm | You have shown" strength with your arm |
| 10 and scattered the proud in their conceit, | and scattered the proud in their conceit, |
| 11 casting down the mighty from their thrones | casting down the mighty from their thrones |
| 12 and lifting up the lowly. | and lifting up the lowly. |
| 13 <u>God</u> has filled the hungry with good things | You have filled the hungry with good things |
| 14 and sent the rich away empty. | and sent the rich away empty. |
| 15 <i>He</i> has come to the aid of <i>his</i> servant Israel, | You have come to the aid of your servant Israel, |
| 16 to remember the promise of mercy, | to remember the promise of mercy, |
| 17 the promise made to our forebears, | the promise made to our forebears, |
| 18 to Abraham and <i>his</i> children for ever. | to Abraham and his children for ever. |

All of the underlined and italicized words are now replaced with second-person pronouns. The ELLC document speaks well of this approach, citing

such benefits as “the smoothness and immediacy of the result.”¹⁸

On one level, it is difficult to argue with that assessment. Compared to the version on the left, where various means are employed to eradicate the masculine pronouns, the alternate version with its direct address to God flows quite nicely. But at what cost? Philip Pfatteicher, author of numerous companion volumes for *LBW*, offers an insightful criticism of this alternate approach as it was used in the ELCA’s new hymnal. Speaking of the Magnificat, he writes,

This approach, among other things, destroys a principal beauty of the Magnificat. In the Bible, the frightened and bewildered young woman to whom an archangel spoke does not dare to address the “Most High” directly. With careful and humble indirection, she averts here [sic] eyes and confesses, “The Almighty has done great things for me, and holy in his name.” Her use of the third person is essential in her address to God, which is at the same time an address to “all generations” that come after her.¹⁹

The ELLC’s alternate version of the Benedictus, which is also used in *ELW*, presents a similar problem. In the original form, which is preserved below in the left-hand column, Zechariah speaks of God’s work in the third person throughout the first half of the canticle, rejoicing in what God has accomplished in the incarnation of his Son in the womb of the virgin. (Remember, Mary was likely in the room as Zechariah uttered these words.) His third-person speech was a proclamation of God’s saving deeds to all those who were present on the occasion of his son’s naming and circumcision. As we appropriate his words today, we likewise proclaim to one another and to the world the same Gospel message. Then, beginning with line 15, Zechariah shifts from third-person address *about* God to second-person address that is directed to his son: “You, my child . . .”

ICET (1975)

- 1 Blessed be the Lord, the God
of Israel,
- 2 *he* has come to *his* people and
set them free....

ELLC (1988)—alternate version ELW

- Blessed are **you**, Lord, the God
of Israel,
you have come to **your** people
and set them free....

¹⁸ *Praying Together*, xiii.

¹⁹ Philip H. Pfatteicher, “Reforming the Daily Office: Examining Two New Lutheran Books,” *CrossAccents* 15, no. 2 (2007): 35.

| | |
|---|--|
| 10 This was the oath <i>he</i> swore to our father Abraham: | This was the oath God swore to our father Abraham: |
| 11 to set us free from the hands of our enemies, | to set us free from the hands of our enemies, |
| 12 free to worship <i>him</i> without fear, | free to worship you without fear, |
| 13 holy and righteous in <i>his</i> sight, | holy and righteous before you , |
| 14 all the days of our life. | all the days of our life. |
| 15 <u>You</u> , my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High | And <u>you</u> , child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High |

In the ELLC alternate version (right-hand column), Zechariah's words *about* God have been changed to second-person address *to* God. This shift, however, introduces an unintended confusion into the text. In lines 1–14, each occurrence of the pronoun “you” refers to God, whereas in line 15 the word “you” now refers to John, creating a cognitive disconnect. Without serious catechesis of this canticle, the average worshiper will not understand the distinction and will miss the significance of Zachariah's proclamation.

While these two canticles are prime examples of how the new ELCA hymnal has applied inclusive language to speech about God, they are not isolated examples. A more far-reaching effort is found in the Psalter, where the editors have employed a variety of techniques to eliminate all masculine pronouns. The revision of Psalm 95, very familiar to us as the Venite in Matins and Morning Prayer, demonstrates the various techniques that the editors of *ELW* employ to accomplish their goal.

| ELW | NRSV/ESV |
|--|---|
| 1 Come, let us sing to the Lord; let us shout for joy to the rock of our salvation. | O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! |
| 2 Let us come before God's presence with thanksgiving and raise a loud shout to the Lord with psalms. | Let us come into <i>his</i> presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to <i>him</i> with songs of praise! |
| 3 For you , Lord, are a great God, and a great ruler above all gods. | For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods. |
| 4 In your hand are the caverns of the earth; the heights of the hills are also yours | In <i>his</i> hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are <i>his</i> also |

7a For the **Lord** is our **God**, and we
are the people of **God's** pasture
and the sheep of **God's** hand.

For *he* is our God, and we are
the people of *his* pasture, and
the sheep of *his* hand.

In vv. 2 and 7 the masculine pronouns are replaced with the words "Lord" and "God." Note how obnoxious the repetition of "God" becomes in v. 7. The assessment we heard earlier is correct: no one talks this way! Beginning in v. 3, the technique that was applied earlier to the canticles is used here with the substitution of the word "you," thus allowing the editors to eliminate the masculine pronouns through v. 5. While the masculine pronouns have been tidily expunged, the very nature of the psalm has been changed. Dan Biles explains this use of direct address to God in this way, "That is not what the Psalm is about. Nor is it what we are about at the beginning of morning prayer: we invite all who will respond to join in the praise of God. We praise God before those whom we invite to join in worship with us."²⁰

This particular technique, the adjustment from third to second-person address, is employed throughout the Psalter and was touted by those who led the development of *ELW* as one of their prouder achievements for dealing with the inclusive language issue. In one sense, this approach is difficult to criticize. There are a number of psalms where even in the Hebrew text there exists a shifting back and forth between second- and third-person address.²¹ Consider the example from Psalm 23.

ELW

NRSV

- 1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall
not be in want.
- 2 The Lord makes me lie down in
green pastures and leads me
beside still waters.
- 3 You restore my soul, O Lord, and
guide me along right pathways
for your name's sake.
- 4 Though I walk through the val-
ley of the shadow of death, I
shall fear no evil; for **you** are

- The LORD is my shepherd, I
shall not want.
- He* makes me lie down in green
pastures; *he* leads me beside still
waters;
- he* restores my soul. *He* leads me
in right paths for *his* name's
sake.
- Even though I walk through the
darkest valley I fear no evil; for
you are with me; **your** rod and

²⁰ Biles, "ELW and the Abuse of Language," 41.

²¹ Examples, in addition to the example of Psalm 23 that follows, include 18:24-25; 97:8-9; 99:2-3; 102:15-16; 104:5-6, 14-16; 116:7-8, 15-16.

- | | |
|--|---|
| with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. | your staff—they comfort me. |
| 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil, and my cup is running over. | You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. |
| 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. | Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long. |

In the Hebrew, the shift from third to second person occurs at v. 4 and then back to third person in v. 6. In the *ELW* version, the shift to second person occurs one verse earlier in order to avoid the masculine pronouns in v. 3.

It is difficult to know what to make of all this. While I would never support the rewriting of Scripture as the editors of *ELW* have done, I do understand how they have justified their actions. I offer two brief thoughts. First, since the movement between second- and third-person address occurs in some of the psalms, this is an area that merits further study. A careful examination of every place in the psalms where this shift in persons exists in the original text might yield some insights as to why the biblical writers did what they did. Second, in the end the *ELW* editors are perhaps too clever by half. Whereas in English (and most other modern languages) masculine and feminine are distinguished grammatically only in the third person, in Hebrew the second person also distinguishes between the masculine and feminine. Thus, with every occurrence in the psalms where God is addressed as “you,” the form is in the masculine. The irony is that were the revised psalms in *ELW* translated back into Hebrew, the translators would have to make a choice whether to use the masculine or feminine form.

There are other translations in the *ELW* Psalter than merit greater consideration. Take the opening verses of Psalm 1:

| ELW | NRSV | ESV |
|--|---|--|
| 1 Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seats of the scornful. | Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; | Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; |

| | | | |
|---|--|--|---|
| 2 | Their delight is in the law of the Lord, and they mediate on God's teaching day and night. | but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. | but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. |
|---|--|--|---|

Looking past the unfortunate use of the word "happy," note the very significant switch from "man" to "they." Patrick Henry Reardon, a noted theologian in the Orthodox church, argues that the whole Psalter must be read christologically, that the psalms are, in fact, Christology in prayer form.²² So argued Luther and the fathers of the church through the centuries.²³ The translators of the example given above (and note that here the *ELW* editors rely heavily on the New Revised Standard Version) are simply being dishonest. The word "man" in v. 1 is not the Hebrew word אָדָם, which encompasses the whole of humanity, but the gender-specific אִישׁ. The same tomfoolery occurs in the revisions to Psalm 8:

| | ELW | NRSV | ESV |
|---|---|--|---|
| 4 | What are mere mortals that you should be mindful of them, human beings that you should care for them? | What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? | What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? |
| 5 | Yet you have made them little less than divine; with glory and honor you crown them. | Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. | Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. |
| 6 | You have made them rule over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, | You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, | You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet, |

²² Patrick Henry Reardon, "Christology and the Psalter," *Touchstone* 7 (Spring 1994): 7. See also his devotional book, *Christ in the Psalms* (Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 2000), where he carries out his thesis in his devotions on all of the psalms.

²³ Martin Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms*, Luther's Works, vol. 10: *First Lectures on the Psalms* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1974), 11.

Does the translation render the text less exclusive? Perhaps. But a new theology, I fear, is at work. Reardon summarizes the concerns presented by such retranslations:

[O]ne observes that the choice of words has been determined by considerations of "political correctness," with no reference to a Christ-centered reading of the text.

Quite simply, the psalm in question is not being presented in a Christian way, because Christ has been eliminated in the interests of an alien ideological agenda.²⁴

So it is with other manipulations of the language of the psalms. For example, when masculine pronouns are repeatedly replaced with words like "Lord" or "God," one almost gets the impression that different gods are being spoken of. Note this example from Psalm 97:

| ELW | NRSV/ESV |
|--|---|
| 12 Rejoice in the Lord, you righteous, and give thanks to God's holy name. | Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous, and give thanks to his holy name! |

Or again, this example from Psalm 1:

| ELW | NRSV |
|---|--|
| 2 Their delight is in the law of the Lord, and they meditate on God's teaching day and night. | but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. |

While more examples could be adduced, the point is clear: a nip and tuck approach to cutting away supposedly offensive masculine pronouns is not the cosmetic surgery that proponents of this approach would have us believe.

There is, however, an additional consideration to which the call for inclusive language often leads, namely, the use of feminine imagery for God. For example, the National Council of Churches' *Inclusive Language Lectionary* provided this version of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane: "My father [*and Mother*], if it be possible let this cup pass from me." Such language is so blatantly out of bounds that we have for the most part simply dismissed it out of hand and given it no further thought. While

²⁴ Reardon, "Christology and the Psalter," 10.

such a hands-off approach may have sufficed in the past, it is increasingly the case that more needs to be said. Consider very briefly the following.

First, no one who advocates the biblical, churchly language when referring to God believes that God is a male. Such an argument is a red herring. The fact of the matter is that when both masculine imagery and feminine imagery are used for God—either together or interchangeably—then the notion of sexuality is imported into the biblical witness where it did not exist in the first place. It will not do to argue that the cultural limitations of the ancient world were the reason why only masculine language for God is used in the Scriptures. The Israelites' neighbors had goddesses; so did the pagan religions of the New Testament world.²⁵ Even though there are places in the Bible where motherly characteristics are attributed to God, could it perhaps be, as Louis Roy suggests, "that the Holy Spirit, who inspired [the sacred writings], had his reasons, which the human reason cannot *fully* fathom."²⁶

Leonard Klein attempts to fathom, at least in part, what patriarchal language for God might tell us about him. Klein writes:

He is Father. That is, he is like a Hebrew patriarch, a Middle-eastern Shepherd-King, or a Greco-Roman paterfamilias. He provides, protects, and oversees, and therein powerfully he loves and cherishes. He is also those other things patriarchal that all our sinful flesh would like to repudiate. He is Lawgiver, Judge, and Chastiser. There is, we are here reminded, an *opus alienum* of God, a remote, mysterious otherness. He is ultimately our Executioner, who extracts from us the penalty of our sin. He is also the Victor over death, and so we proclaim at the Easter Vigil, "Yahweh is a Warrior; Yahweh is his name."²⁷

²⁵ William Weinrich, "'It Is Not Given to Women to Teach': A *Lex* in Search of a *Ratio*," in *Women Pastors?: The Ordination of Women in Biblical Lutheran Perspective*, ed. Matthew C. Harrison and John T. Pless, 3rd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), 462. See also the following from a 1996 report of the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations: "Despite the fact that biblical language is thoroughly gender specific and that God is personally referred to through masculine names, titles, and pronouns (see below), the Bible contains explicit affirmation that God transcends all biological and gender categories. Sexual nature was characteristic of the pagan gods and goddesses in the environment of ancient Israel. But Israel steadfastly and uncompromisingly rejected any such understanding of God." *Biblical Revelation and Inclusive Language* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1996), 8.

²⁶ Louis Roy, "Inclusive Language Regarding God, *Worship* 65, no. 3 (1991): 213; emphasis original.

²⁷ Leonard Klein, "That God Is to Be Spoken of as 'He,'" 24.

To reject this language, Klein suggests, is ultimately a denial of the Law. The use of feminine, motherly imagery for God plays into the attempt to overcome the otherness of God, which is nothing other than the "domestication of the deity." Klein continues: "The *skandalan* is not male-ness. It is the otherness of God, and it is that upon which Christianity must absolutely insist. The God of the Bible is not to be co-opted by anyone who insists that the snake was right, that we are wise in our own right, and that the ways of God must be justified to us."²⁸ Paul Raabe points out how feminine language for God alters our relationship to God in a fundamental way: "The desire to change God-language into feminine language is based on a longing to become a peer with God, to relate to God as a 'mate,' as the Aussies would say The entire assumption here is false. We do not relate to God as fellow partners, as like-to-like."²⁹ Carl Braaten is even more devastating in his critique when he writes: "Any change in God's name points to a different religion. A different name means a different God and a different gospel. That is what the controversy is all about."³⁰

Likewise, William Weinrich corroborates this critique of a feminized deity by pointing out that

the idea of a divine Mother . . . is associated with the idea of a divine earth. The distinction between God and the creation is compromised and the notion of God's transcendence is lost. But with the loss of the distinction between God and the world there is the corresponding loss of the ideas of divine grace (God wills to love) and of hope (in divine purpose and in the possibility of newness).³¹

Pressing further, Weinrich explores the significance that God reveals himself as Father by using the example of the call of Abraham. He writes,

[W]hat is important to note is that God's fatherhood is indicated by His free and gratuitous election of Abraham and, in him, of Israel. God related to Abraham as a distinct Other who, while free and possessing transcendent autonomy ("God Almighty"), *chooses* to focus and to direct His love to a particular people and on behalf of a particular people. By making covenant with Abraham, God in effect *adopts* Abraham and his descendants and makes them His own. And this God does without any corresponding divine motherhood It is

²⁸ Leonard Klein, "That God Is to Be Spoken of as 'He,'" 27.

²⁹ Paul R. Raabe, "On Feminized God-Language," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 74 (2010): 130.

³⁰ Lowell G. Almen and Carl E. Braaten, "Inclusive Language and Speaking of God," *Word & World* 11, no. 1 (1991): 61.

³¹ William Weinrich, "'It Is Not Given to Women to Teach,'" 487.

this prevenient, free, and willing making of a people that we term grace (see Dt 7:6-8). Precisely as the God of grace is God "Father."³²

Weinrich then goes on to demonstrate how this understanding of God as Father is carried through in the New Testament.

Christopher Seitz also supports this view that in the New Testament Jesus speaks of God as Father not "to assert the maleness of God, but to assert the closest personal relationship between himself and the transcendent God of Israel." He continues,

"Mother" is further unfit . . . as a term of address because Jesus' mother is Mary, a woman. But Jesus' father is not a man, on crude analogy with Mary the woman, but the wholly other God of Israel who, nevertheless, is spoken to on the most intimate terms possible. By speaking of God as father, Jesus points the way toward a particularly intimate and personal relationship with God, one that he himself knows, and then offers to us and the world at large. This is not an act of sexual oppression, but an act of sheer grace and mercy.³³

Those who might not want to go quite as far as using feminine names for God have tried other approaches. In *ELW* the following formula is provided as an alternate to the trinitarian formula: "Blessed be the Holy Trinity, one God, who forgives all our sin, whose mercy endures forever."³⁴ Another approach, sometimes seen in our own circles, is to substitute the names Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with titles like Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier. The titles, however, are too limiting. Using the title of "Creator" for the Father is inadequate, given that the scriptures also speak of the participation of the Son and Spirit in the work of creation. To use such titles as the names for the persons limits language about God to the relationship between God and us, the economic Trinity. What is lost is any language for discussing the immanent Trinity, that is, the relationship of the persons within the Godhead.³⁵ In a similar fashion, the masculine pro-

³² William Weinrich, "'It Is Not Given to Women to Teach,'" 487.

³³ Christopher R. Seitz, "Reader Competence and the Offense of Biblical Language: The Limitations of So-Called Inclusive Language," *Pro Ecclesia* 2, no. 2 (1993): 145.

³⁴ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 94.

³⁵ Louis Roy, "Inclusive Language Regarding God," 210-211. Here Roy is referencing the work of Daniel Helminiak, "Doing Right by Women and the Trinity Too," *America* (11 February 1989): 110, 119. See also *Biblical Revelation and Inclusive Language*, 14-16, especially the following: "In God fatherhood is not extrinsic to the being of God. In him "Father" is not a title; it designates and specifies God's personal/hypostatic reality as Father who eternally begets his Son. Similarly, in God sonship is not extrinsic to his being. In him "Son" is not a title; it designates and specifies his personal/hypostatic reality as Son who is eternally begotten of the Father" (16).

nouns are essential to any discussion of the Trinity. Dan Biles offers this incisive observation, "One simply cannot do Trinitarian theology without the use of pronouns, which establish relationships between the persons of the Trinity."³⁶

To excise the pronouns is, ultimately, to depersonalize God. And that is where liturgical readjustments have, one might say, served as an off-ramp to apostasy. What may have begun as good intentions by some has led the church quite astray. In this age of depersonalization, the last thing the church needs to do is eviscerate the personal relationship that God desires with his children. Katherine Sonderegger helpfully sums up this truth when she writes:

Christians call God Father, I believe, not because we and all our ancestors grew up in a patriarchal culture, nor because the Roman father was the model and local authority of the Empire, but because Jesus of Nazareth called upon the God of Israel by that name. Indeed, I believe that only a revealer could disclose a new name for the Almighty Lord—not disciples, mystics, or scholars. Christianity is marked off from Judaism by its willingness to call God by a new name—Father, Son, Spirit—considered by Jews apostate on just these grounds. Only the reality of the incarnation itself could justify such a shocking and revolutionary renaming of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Should I be persuaded that names are in fact abbreviated descriptions, I would argue that Father means just this: the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus calls upon the Father; the Father bestows upon Jesus, at the baptism and the transfiguration, the name *Son*. It is an act of Christian boldness . . . to call God Father, because by that name we refer immediately and without fear to the very God that the Son knew. In that spiritual calling upon the Father's name, we stand where Christ stood: as adopted heirs, as the beloved.³⁷

³⁶ Biles, "ELW and the Abuse of Language," 42. See also Raabe, "On Feminized God-Language," 126–127, and Donald D. Hook and Alvin F. Kimel Jr., "The Pronouns of Deity: A Theolinguistic Critique of Feminist Proposals," in *This Is My Name Forever: The Trinity and Gender Language for God*, ed. Alvin F. Kimel Jr. (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2001), 62–87.

³⁷ Katherine Sonderegger, "On the Holy Name of God," *Theology Today* 58, no. 1 (2001): 397–398.