

On Feminized God-Language

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A couple of Mormon missionaries stopped by our house. Usually I like to take the time to talk with them, but this time I was in a hurry, late for another commitment. So I answered the door and said, "We are Trinitarian Monotheists who confess the Nicene Creed. May I help you?" Needless to say, there wasn't much of a conversation that time. My wife said I was too hard on them. They were, after all, only teenagers. She was right. But I thought I would cut to the chase.

I. Trinitarian Monotheists

We are Trinitarian Monotheists who confess the Nicene Creed, or what is technically called the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.¹ It begins, "We believe in one God, the Father." In the New Testament the word "God" (θεός) occurs over 1300 times and almost always (over ninety-five percent of the time) refers to the First Person of the Trinity. Consider, for example, the apostolic benediction, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor 13:14), or the apostolic blessing, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 1:3; Eph 1:3; 1 Pet 1:3; cf. 2 Cor 11:31). Jesus is "the Son of God," not the Son of the Trinity but the Son of the First Person.

The Scriptures clearly teach the deity of Christ. There are at least eight New Testament texts that explicitly use the word "God" (θεός) to refer to the Son (Matt 1:23; John 1:1; 20:28; Acts 20:28; Rom 9:5; Titus 2:13; Heb 1:8; 2 Pet 1:1).² The Nicene Creed rightly confesses him to be "God from [ἐκ] God." At least one text explicitly calls the Holy Spirit "God" (Acts 5:3-4). While the New Testament teaches the deity of the Son and the Spirit, the vast majority of New Testament texts use the word "God" [θεός] to refer to the First Person of the Trinity, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is how I will use the word "God" in this paper. I will focus my

¹ On the creed and its history, see J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd edition (New York: Longman Group, 1972); Leo Donald Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787): Their History and Theology* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1983).

² For a solid treatment of the deity of Jesus Christ, see Robert M. Bowman Jr. and J. Ed Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007).

comments about "God-language" on the First Person of the Trinity, God the Father.

II. One God

"We believe in one God, the Father." The "God" we are confessing is not Baal or Zeus. This God is not an impersonal force, as in *Star Wars*: "Use the force, Luke." The God we are referring to is the Creator of the heavens and the earth, the God who called Abraham, the God of ancient Israel, the God who spoke by the Prophets. Our God is the God of Moses and the Prophets. We must always anchor our "God-talk" in the Old Testament. This is especially important in our current context of religious pluralism.

In the ancient world there were many gods and goddesses, but we confess with ancient Israel that there is only one God (Deut 6:4). Jesus reaffirms ancient Israel's monotheism in his prayer to his Father: "And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3). In First Corinthians 8:6 the Apostle Paul writes, "yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist." The Holy Spirit enables us to believe and confess this (1 Cor 12:3). In these kinds of texts, the emphasis on "one God" is not used in contrast to the Son or the Holy Spirit but in contrast to other gods. The Persons of the Trinity cannot be divided or separated.

The term "God" must always be used in the singular, and we must always be ready to add, "and there is no other god." So the Father is God and there is no other god; Jesus is God, and there is no other god; the Spirit is God and there is no other god. We cannot think of a Person of the Trinity as one-third of God. Each one is all of God and there is no other god. The divine nature/essence/substance cannot be divided.

III. The Trinitarian Narrative

We believe in one God, the Father. This God did his mighty deeds in the history of ancient Israel as recorded in Moses and the Prophets. This God spoke by the prophets of ancient Israel. The narrative does not stop there but moves on to the fulfillment. The Scriptures reveal two different ways of speaking about the fulfillment of the overall narrative. One way is illustrated by Isaiah 35: God himself will come into history mighty to save. Jesus is the God of Israel in the flesh. The other biblical approach speaks of the God of Israel sending his Son into the world. Both approaches are true and should not be pitted against one another. It is the second approach

that I wish to develop here. The Apostle Paul summarizes this narrative in Galatians 4:4–6:

But when the fullness of time had come, God [this same God of Moses and the Prophets] sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"

There is a narrative here, and it is a trinitarian narrative. This is not just a story but a narrative that refers to real actions done in history. The Christian faith does not live in the world of mythology, as one myth among others, as one religion among others. The trinitarian narrative that we believe, teach, and confess refers to real actions done in history and real words spoken in history. God sent forth his Son into human history, born of the woman Mary, his human mother, born under the law. The Son's purpose was to redeem those under the law, so that all of us "might receive the adoptive sonship" (υιοθεσία). The eternal Son of God makes us adopted sons of his Father.

The Trinitarian narrative does not stop there. There are two "sendings" by God the Father. The Apostle Paul continues his summary of the Trinitarian narrative by stating that God sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, enabling us to call God "Abba, Father" (Gal 4:6). By the Spirit of the Son we address God as our Father.

We were baptized into the trinitarian name, "into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19). To avoid modalism—speaking of God as if one person with three terms—it is important with that baptismal formula that we use all four definite articles ("the") and both conjunctions ("and").³ We are unashamedly Trinitarian Monotheists who confess God the Father and his Son and the Spirit of the Father and of the Son. In order to speak of God, the church must always keep fully operative both the monotheistic—one God—language and the trinitarian—three persons—language.

IV. God the Father

Athanasius had to emphasize against Arius that when we say "God" and then add "the Father," we are immediately talking within the framework of the Trinity. The term Father necessitates another, the Father

³ See Peter Toon, *Our Triune God: A Biblical Portrayal of the Trinity* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 236–238.

of another, the Father of his Son.⁴ There was never a once when the Son did not exist, and there was never a once when the Father was not Father. The Son existed eternally as the Son of the Father and the Father was always his Father. God did not become Father at some later point in time. And the Spirit is and has always been the Spirit of the Father and of the Son.

The First Person of the Trinity is fundamentally Father from eternity. This is not just a simile. It does not simply mean that God's actions toward his people are "father-like." Even before creation he was Father of his Son. This is the deepest reality of the First Person. Before being Creator, Lord, and Judge of creation, he was and is and forever will be the eternal Father of his eternal Son. Faith does not change or marginalize that term "Father." Faith extols it.

God is the Father. This language cannot be dismissed as simply the way a male-dominated patriarchal society imagined God or constructed God-language. As recorded in the gospels, this is how God spoke to Jesus—"You are my beloved Son"—and this is how Jesus spoke to God—"My Father."⁵ It is not a question of whether we like this language or not, whether this language furthers our goals or not. This is how God and Jesus addressed each other. It is an historical given that exists outside of us and our ability to spin or re-conceive or re-imagine. God is the Father of his Son. The Son is the Son of God his Father. That is the way they are related, whether people like it or not.

V. The Pronoun "He"

Because the First Person is fundamentally Father from eternity, the biblical writers correspondingly use masculine pronouns for God. God is a "he," not a "she." Moreover, God the Father is a person, not an impersonal "it." To refer to God, Hebrew uses the masculine pronoun, not the feminine pronoun, and Greek uses the masculine pronoun, not the feminine or neuter pronoun. This is the standard biblical language for God, which appears not just occasionally but dozens of times on every page in both Testaments. To be sure, the Scriptures can speak of God's

⁴ For an excellent introduction to the trinitarian arguments of Athanasius, see Thomas G. Weinandy, *Athanasius: A Theological Introduction* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007).

⁵ See, for example, David P. Scaer on the Trinity in Matthew, *Discourses in Matthew: Jesus Teaches the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004), 201-209.

actions in history with a variety of similes, including feminine similes.⁶ For example, God comforts Zion like a mother comforts her child (Isa 66:13). Such similes are ways of communicating what God's actions are like in history. But the Scriptures never directly call God a "she." The excellent CTCR document on "Biblical Revelation and Inclusive Language" provides a good discussion of this whole issue. They observe: "In neither the Old Testament nor in the New Testament is God ever referred to by a feminine pronoun."⁷

For the First Person, the language of "he" does not mean a sexual male. God the Father is not a sexual male. The First Person of the Trinity does not have a human body. We are not Mormons. He does not have a goddess as a wife. The biblical faith is radically contrasted with the religions of the Ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman world. With the First Person of the Trinity there is a basic distinction between the grammatical gender "he" and the sexual male.

The pronoun for God the Father is "he," not "she" or "it." The pronoun for God the Son is "he," not "she" or "it." And the proper pronoun for God the Holy Spirit is "he," not "she" or "it." While the grammatical gender of the Hebrew word for "Spirit" (רוּחַ) is usually feminine (although sometimes masculine) and the grammatical gender of the Greek word for "Spirit" (πνεῦμα) is neuter, the Apostle John deliberately stresses that the proper pronoun for the Spirit is "he" (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7-8, 13-14).⁸ The Holy Spirit is not a sexual female "she." The Holy Spirit is not a sexual male either. The Holy Spirit has no body. Nor is the Holy Spirit an impersonal "it" such as an impersonal energy. The Holy Spirit as a Person of the Trinity is properly a "he." In short, the proper pronoun for each of the Triune Persons is "he," not "she." This is the pattern of sound words given by God's own self-revelation recorded in the Scriptures.

VI. Feminist Challenge on God-Language

Now enter the feminist revisionists. There are, of course, women theologians who are orthodox, biblical, creedal theologians. We should

⁶ On feminine similes for God in the Bible, see Alvin F. Kimel Jr., "The Holy Trinity Meets Ashtoreth: A Critique of The Episcopal 'Inclusive' Liturgies," *Anglican Theological Review* 71 (1989) 25-47.

⁷ *Biblical Revelation and Inclusive Language*, A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (1998), 11 (emphasis original).

⁸ See Hermann Sasse, "On the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit," 17-39 in *We Confess the Church*, trans. Norman Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 26.

honor good, orthodox theological work done by women. By the term "feminist revisionists" I am referring to those who want to revise the church's traditional God-language. They generally oppose the church's use of masculine language for God, especially calling God "Father."

To be sure, we should not too easily classify every characteristic and action as either distinctively masculine or distinctively feminine. For example, "compassion" is often considered distinctively feminine, but Psalm 103 attributes "compassion" to fathers (v. 13). We often think of "strength" as a distinctively masculine trait, but Proverb 31 attributes "strength" to the godly woman (vv. 17, 25, 29).

Nevertheless, the church does traditionally use masculine language for God. God is the Father; God is he. Feminist revisionists object precisely to this use of masculine language. One popular suggestion is to replace the trinitarian formula with this formula: "Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier." The problem with this replacement is twofold. First, it designates the Trinity's external works toward creation, *opera ad extra*, but the revealed trinitarian terms designate the Persons' relationships to each other within the Trinity, the Father of the Son and the Spirit of the Father and of the Son. Second, the replacement divides the external actions of the Trinity, the *opera ad extra*. In contrast, the Trinity is undivided and therefore the Trinity's actions toward the outside are non-divisible (*opera ad extra non divisa sunt*). The works of creation, redemption, and sanctification flow from the Father through His Son and in His Holy Spirit. There can be no substitutions for the trinitarian name.

Feminist revisionists challenge the church's preference for masculine God-language. Their literature reveals that they generally operate with two key assumptions: first, that God-language is designed to shape society; and second, that we relate to God as like-to-like. Both assumptions deserve to be challenged.

VII. Assumption: God-Language Shapes Society

Feminist revisionists assume that God-talk impacts societal relationships. If we use masculine language for God, then the males get to dominate society. Mary Daly puts it this way: "if God is male, then the male is God."⁹ She assumes that speaking of God as Father privileges human males over females, making the human males more god-like and

⁹ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 19.

hence more powerful in society. Sallie McFague asserts: "The androcentric metaphors that form the principal imagery for God in the Western religious tradition return to us with divine sanction to legitimate the patriarchal world in which we live."¹⁰ Masculine God-language reinforces a patriarchal, androcentric culture. A key way, then, to change the societal status quo is to change the language for God. Since the institutional church is so prominent in the United States, this means changing the church's God-talk. Feminist revisionists consider language about God to be an instrument or tool for shaping society. By using feminine language for God, women will enjoy more empowerment and liberation in society from patriarchal and sexist oppression.

The assumption that religious language legitimates the societal status quo might, in fact, be true for ancient Near Eastern polytheism. A good case can be made that ancient Syro-Palestinian religion with its heavenly bureaucracy of gods and goddesses reinforced the city-state bureaucracy.¹¹ The connection makes sense for non-Christian religions. If a religion is constructed out of human reason and imagination, it is likely that the religion will support the power of those who create it.

For Christian theology, however, the assumption is false. We do not construct our own God-language. Christian theology is not a human discipline that can be imagined and re-imagined and reinvented by us humans. Christian theology is not simply anthropology or sociology. We do not create God-language in order to bring about certain societal conditions. Proper God-language is given from above. God has taken the initiative and revealed himself.

Apart from God's own self-revelation, we all would have to rely on our own imaginations to construct a deity or deities. That is what the Scriptures call idolatry, humans creating god. Such a god might be wood, metal, or stone. Such a god might be lofty ideals. In either case, that god is an idol, something constructed by sinners. Both Luther and Calvin observed that the human heart is an idol factory.¹² Left to ourselves, we would all just be groping in the dark, exchanging the truth of God for a lie and worshiping the creature (Rom 1:25). But the Creator—blessed be his name—has stepped out into the light and made himself known—first

¹⁰ Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 151.

¹¹ Lowell K. Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven: The Syro-Palestinian Pantheon as Bureaucracy* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994).

¹² Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 83.

through his historical deeds and words with ancient Israel as recorded and given by Moses and the Prophets. And now in these last days he has revealed himself in fulfillment of Moses and the Prophets through Jesus, his own incarnate Son.

Proper God-language is a gift from above. To be used for what purpose? The purpose of God's self-revelation is not to construct a different kind of government or human culture or society. It is not for human self-empowerment. It is not to change societal relationships and redistribute earthly power. Its purpose is to lead sinners to know God the Father and Jesus Christ, whom the Father has sent, for that is eternal life (John 17:3). In this entire discussion we need to emphasize divine revelation and the vertical purpose of theological language. God takes the initiative and reveals himself and the way we should confess him. God reveals the proper God-language to use, and its purpose is to lead us to confess and praise him to his glory (Phil 2:11). And the purpose of God-given theological language is to bring sinners into a righteous standing before their Maker and Judge. It is not to change society.

VIII. Assumption: Relating to God as Peers

Feminist revisionists charge that speaking of God as "Father" excludes half of the human race. According to Rosemary Radford Ruether, images of God "must be transformative, pointing us back to our authentic potential and forward to new redeemed possibilities." She complains that God as Father (or Mother, for that matter):

suggests a kind of permanent parent-child relationship to God. God becomes a neurotic parent who does not want us to grow up. To become autonomous and responsible for our own lives is the gravest sin against God. Patriarchal theology uses the parent image for God to prolong spiritual infantilism as virtue and to make autonomy and assertion of free will a sin.¹³

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. Women can relate to a God imaged in feminine terms better than a God in masculine terms.

The entire assumption here is false. We do not relate to God as fellow partners, as like-to-like. Human fathers do not relate to God our Father as

¹³ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 69.

fellow fathers themselves. "As one father to another Father, I know what you are going through. I can sympathize. It's tough being a father." That is not how human fathers relate to God our Father. Rather, human fathers relate to God our Father as his children. He is your Father and you are his child. He is the perfect Father, our heavenly Father through his Son Jesus.

So let's take a short quiz. Fill in the blanks.

- 1) God is our Father and we are his ____ (children).
- 2) God is our Creator and we are his ____ (creatures).
- 3) God is our King and we are his ____ (subjects).
- 4) God is our Lord and we are his ____ (servants).

You get the idea. We do not relate to God as a fellow partner, as like to like.

It is the same for our relationship to Christ. Mollenkott complains that "to speak of Christ always as he is to deny the Christedness of women, the presence and contribution of women within the Body of Christ."¹⁴ However, we relate to Christ as his disciples, not as fellow christians ourselves. We relate to Jesus our Lord as his servants, not as fellow lords. Human bridegrooms do not relate to Jesus, the Bridegroom of the church, as fellow bridegrooms but as members of his bride, the church. This is belaboring the obvious but sometimes the obvious needs to be belabored. God is God and we are not. For every term used in the Scriptures to refer to God, we need to ask: How do we relate to that God?

The program to reimage God in feminist terms is dominated by the desire to be like God. God-language is seen as serving self-empowerment. It is basically a modern, sexualized way of repeating the original sin in the Garden of Eden, trying to be like God, trying to make God like us.

The truth of the matter is just the opposite. Lutheran theology understands this point more clearly than anyone. We all stand before God as passive recipients. Men are righteous before God in the same way that women are righteous before God. All of us, both men and women, stand before God as rebellious sinners and all of us are justified before God in the same way, by God's undeserved favor, through faith alone, and on account of the all-sufficient work of Jesus Christ his Son for us. In the horizontal dimension toward each other, husbands and wives have

¹⁴ Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Godling: Human Responsibility and the Bible* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 51.

different vocations based on creation. But in the vertical dimension before God we are all sinners and we are all justified by faith. Human fathers do not relate to God the Father in a way different from human mothers. The gospel of justification, redemption, reconciliation, and the kingdom of God is the same for both men and women.

The First Person of the Trinity is the Father of Jesus his Son, who is "begotten of His Father before all worlds . . . of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father." The First Person of the Trinity is also the God of Jesus according to the human nature of Jesus (John 20:17; 1 Cor 11:3; Eph 1:17).¹⁵ Jesus remains true Man, the last Adam, the new and greater Davidic King, and so on. Jesus makes his God our God and makes his Father our Father. As Jesus says in John 20:17, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."

One of the Trinity has become one of us. Jesus is our Brother by virtue of the same Father. We do not have the same mother. His mother was Mary. To feminize God as Mother or to de-gender God is to separate our God from the God and Father of our Lord Jesus. Then we would no longer be in the family of Jesus.

IX. Faith Does Not Require a Simpatico Human Experience

Faith does not require a simpatico existential experience of a status on the human level. For example, human bridegrooms do not relate to Christ the Bridegroom as fellow bridegrooms. By faith human bridegrooms are part of the Bride of Christ, his church. But how can men relate to being a bride? Such an objection is irrelevant. Faith is trust in the external promises of Christ. Men can understand what it means to be Christ's bride and by the Spirit can trust the promises of Christ. The same is true for women. By faith in the Son of God and by the power of the Holy Spirit women receive the gift of adopted sonship and are heirs of the promise (Gal 4:6-7). It is not necessary to be a human male to be adopted sons of God with Jesus as their Brother. Faith is trust in the external promises of Christ. It does not presuppose an existential experience of a given status on the human level. You do not have to be male to understand the blessing of sonship given by the Son of God or to receive that blessing by faith.

¹⁵ In the common formula "the God and Father of the Lord Jesus," both nouns apply to the genitive. See Martin Chemnitz, *The Two Natures in Christ*, trans. J.A.O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 275.

X. A Hermeneutic of Suspicion

Feminist revisionists generally read the Scriptures with a hermeneutic of suspicion. They think of the biblical writers as unconsciously and yet pervasively sexist, androcentric, or at least patriarchal. So the biblical writers would naturally favor masculine language over feminine language for God. Some feminist writers are more respectful of scriptural authority. They explain the biblical language as a necessary fitting-in with their patriarchal society. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott writes:

My own sense is that it is perfectly natural for the Bible to contain a vast predominance of masculine God-language, springing as it does out of a deeply patriarchal culture. . . . After all, males held all the honor and power in society. Nothing would seem more natural to them than to honor God by exclusively masculine references.¹⁶

Mollenkott claims that the biblical writers had no other option. To address God point blank as a "she" would have been too frontally insulting in a male-oriented culture.

Because the biblical texts were produced supposedly in such a sexist culture, feminist revisionists maintain that contemporary readers must sift through this patriarchalism and find those parts of the Scriptures that, according to them, are truly liberating for women. Very often this process involves pitting one biblical text against another.

Such views of biblical language reflect older forms of liberal theology. Peter Toon reminds us that for over a century liberal Protestantism has proclaimed that "we name God out of our religious experience and thus project our naming of God into God (whoever God as ultimate Mystery be)."¹⁷ Liberal Protestantism has always considered God-language to be a human construction based on human experience. If that were the case, then contemporary people would indeed have the right to revise the God-language used by the biblical writers.

In contrast to such a skeptical approach to the biblical text and the church's language, we affirm the normative authority of the Scriptures. The Scriptures are the sole rule and norm for what the church believes, teaches, and confesses. The Scriptures give God's own self-revelation.

The issue of the authority of the Scriptures is tied up with the issue of hermeneutics. It is not enough simply to assert that the Scriptures are

¹⁶ Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 110.

¹⁷ Toon, *Our Triune God*, 239.

authoritative. How in fact do they wield their normative authority in the church? So many theological debates end up being about hermeneutics, and this is just one example. The hermeneutic of suspicion places the interpreter over the Scriptures as their judge. Accordingly, the magisterial interpreter must lift up those parts of Scripture that are more "liberating" and marginalize those parts that are not. For example, Rosemary Radford Ruether employs the prophetic and liberation biblical streams as norm against other parts of Scripture.¹⁸

We on the contrary want to take a ministerial posture under the Scriptures, following an approach that affirms the centrality of Jesus Christ, God's Son, that affirms the overall unity and coherence of the Scriptures, and that seriously attends to the integrity of each specific text.¹⁹ Accordingly, we work at trying to understand a passage according to its language, its historical setting, and its context. Our approach lets the Scriptures interpret themselves, allowing an author and other parts of the Scriptures to clarify a given passage. Our goal is to teach what in fact the Scriptures teach, not to contradict, subvert, or deconstruct their teaching.

The church's theological God-language is not something to be reached by negotiation whereby different political factions try to reach a compromise position. The church does not operate like U.S. politics. The church gladly receives God's word as a gift. Faith does not criticize the Scriptures. Faith receives God's own self-revelation through the Scriptures as a gift. The theological task is to seek to understand that gift as revealed in the Scriptures in a humble and thankful way. Yes, there is theological work to be done. It requires our best intellectual efforts. But it is done with the ministerial use of reason under the authority of the Scriptures. The old adage remains true: *Fides quaerens intellectum*, "faith (not skepticism) seeking understanding."

XI. Temptation toward Compromise

The effort to feminize God-language has been around for decades. For example, the 1932 Christian Science Hymnal has a verse that goes like this: "Grant then, dear Father-Mother, God, whatever else befall, / This largess of a grateful heart that loves and blesses all."²⁰ The attempt picked up

¹⁸ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 22-33, 61-71.

¹⁹ For a summary of this approach, see James Voelz, *What Does This Mean?* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995), 352-358.

²⁰ *Christian Science Hymnal* (Boston: The Christian Science Publishing Society, 1932, renewed 1960), hymn number 3.

steam in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. Leading names included among others Mary Daly, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Sally McFague, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Letty M. Russell, and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott. They offer a variety of substitutes for the church's God-language: to call the Trinity "Mother, Lover, Friend,"²¹ to refer to God as "God/ess,"²² to revise the Lord's Prayer to "Our Father/Mother who is in Heaven,"²³ etc. The entire effort to feminize God-language is rank heresy, worse than the Arian heresy of the fourth century. The church must not compromise with it one iota.

Intellectual trends typically begin with the scholars and then gradually trickle down. Now decades later one hears lay people talk this way. "That is masculine language for God. Let's use some feminine language." And precisely in this situation churches face a great temptation. It is the temptation to find a compromise, to reach a political reconciliation for the sake of external tranquility within an institutional church body. The compromise typically takes the form of avoiding both feminine and masculine language, avoiding the use of any third-person pronouns at all for God. The result is that God is neither "Mother" nor "Father," neither "she" nor "he." You have to repeat the noun "God" and the adjective "divine" endlessly: "God revealed God-self," "God sent God's Son," "God will keep God's promises," "God spoke the divine word," and so on. Try speaking of God without using the masculine pronoun "he/his/him." It is very difficult indeed. You have to employ all sorts of circumlocutions.

XII. The New ELCA Hymnal

An example of such a compromise is the new ELCA hymnal, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.²⁴ Consider how they have revised the wording to de-gender references to God. For example, they use an inclusive version of the Psalms that refrains from referring to God as "he/his/him." They offer two versions of the Common Doxology, one with traditional wording and one with revised language so as to remove the masculine pronoun "him": "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow; praise God, all creatures here below; praise God above, ye heav'nly host; praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."²⁵

²¹ Sally McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

²² Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 46.

²³ Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine*, 116.

²⁴ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006).

²⁵ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Hymn 885.

Their hymn based on the Magnificat not only removes masculine pronouns but also significantly alters the trinitarian doxology: "Sing glory to the Holy One, give honor to the incarnate Word, / And praise the Pow'r of God most high, from age to age by all adored."²⁶

What do you make of this prayer to be spoken at the Lord's Supper? "O God most majestic, O God most motherly, O God our strength and our song, you show us a vision of a tree of life with fruits for all and leaves that heal the nations. Grant us such life, the life of the Father to the Son, the life of the Spirit of our risen Savior, life in you, now and forever."²⁷ Is there a fourth person in the Trinity – "O God most motherly" – who grants us the life of the Father to the Son, the life of the Spirit? Attempting to compromise with an alien ideology soon ties a prayer-writer in knots.

To their credit, the hymnal keeps the Lord's Prayer in the liturgy and includes Luther's Small Catechism, which reads under the Lord's Prayer:

Our Father in heaven. *What is this? OR What does this mean?* With these words God wants to attract us, so that we come to believe he is truly our Father and we are truly his children, in order that we may ask him boldly and with complete confidence, just as loving children ask their loving father.²⁸

Yet a harsh dissonance is created between the Lord's Prayer with its "Our Father in heaven" and the prayers they prepared for the church year and other occasions. I count 377 prayers printed in the first part of the hymnal.²⁹ Of those 377 prayers, only 13 explicitly address "God the Father,"³⁰ and only 4 explicitly address "God our Father."³¹ To be fair, it should be noted that these prayers consistently speak of Jesus as "Son" and conclude with the trinitarian formula. Some are addressed to Jesus Christ. But the vast majority of the prayers are addressed to "God," "almighty God," "sovereign God," "Lord God," and the like.

The new ELCA hymnal intentionally tries to avoid addressing God as "our Father." Contrast the four Gospels. A speed-read through Matthew, for example, reveals that Jesus wants and invites his disciples to pray to God as their Father. It is not simply that God does father-like actions. God

²⁶ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Hymn 573.

²⁷ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 69.

²⁸ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 1163.

²⁹ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 18–87.

³⁰ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 27, 41, 54, 58, 60, 66, 69, 71, 73, 74, 86, 87 twice.

³¹ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 22, 61 twice, 77.

is our Father in Christ. Jesus blesses us with the right to call his Father our Father. "Only those whom the Son of God has called to faith and discipleship have received the privilege and honor of addressing the Father of Jesus, the Son, as 'our Father' (6:9)."³² Jesus has brought us into his family—not in the sense of making us members of the Trinity but of making himself our Brother and his Father by nature from eternity our Father by adoption in time. The Lord's Prayer with its address to "our Father in heaven" has always been honored by the church as the paradigmatic standard for Christian prayer to God. But in the new ELCA hymnal the Lord's Prayer with its "Our Father" sticks out like a sore thumb, a strange exception among the liturgical prayers.

The old adage is true: *lex orandi lex credendi*, "The way of praying becomes the way of believing." If the people do not pray to "God our Father," will they believe in God their Father through his Son, Jesus the Messiah?

XIII. Conclusion

The church should follow a simple rule: Joyfully use the same language that the ancient Scriptures use. If the church is unable to do that, something is wrong. If scriptural language contradicts your mindset, change your mindset. Instead of reading the Scriptures with a hermeneutic of suspicion, learn to think and speak along *with* the scriptural language. The Scriptures are not a quarry from which to mine some ideas that we can then manipulate. The Scriptures refer to reality. They accurately record God's self-revelation in history through deeds and words. Not only that, they also provide the church with the proper way to speak of the revealed God, the pattern of sound words, the church's theological grammar.

Faith does not bristle at the language of God our Father. Faith does not want to avoid that language or balance that language with God our Mother language. Faith, Holy Spirit-wrought faith, extols the fact that God is our Father through his Son. The almighty Creator of the heavens and the earth, the majestic and holy One who brought into existence the vastness of the universe, the One who is our Maker and Judge—that Creator has become our Father. Jesus Christ has brought us sinners into his family so that he is our Brother and his Father is now our Father. The almighty Creator is our heavenly Father in Christ. And we come before him not only as his creatures but also as his children, members of his family. We pray to our almighty Maker and Judge as children to their Father. That is not

³² Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1–11:1*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 321–322.

something to be embarrassed about. That is something to spread boldly in every land. That is something to extol, to sing and praise from the mountaintops.

There are huge issues at stake in this controversy over God-talk. The church must not compromise with the effort to feminize or de-gender God-language. It is essential for the church, for pastors and teachers, for all Christians to embrace what the Apostle Paul says to Timothy: "Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you" (2 Tim 1:13-14).

Follow the pattern of sound and healthy words. Guard the good deposit. Only these sound words give eternal life. Continue to be Trinitarian Monotheists who confess the Nicene Creed. Continue to say with the Apostle Paul: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." And continue to pray every morning and every evening with a free and merry heart, "I thank you, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, your dear Son. . . . Amen."