In Scripture, God is identified using many names and titles, such as God (elohim, theos), Lord (adonai, kurios), YHWH, and descriptors such as “Rock,” “Comforter,” and “Light of the World.” Upon first glance, these words seem fairly neutral in their gendering of God. However, English frequently assigns masculine pronouns to God. God becomes a “he.” This use of masculine pronouns is common in Scripture as well, especially when the context includes a grammatically masculine name, title, or metaphor for God.

In many modern churches, only masculine language for God is deemed acceptable. This restriction is historically and, more importantly, biblically unfounded. The language we use to define, explain, and identify God shapes the way we understand God. By having an essentially masculine view of God, we blind ourselves to other ways we may connect to God and understand God. This not only distorts our image of God, but a purely masculine view also negatively affects the way we interact with one another—most prominently, how the church interacts with women. By broadening our God-language to include feminine imagery, we expand the ways in which we can connect to God; this can begin to rectify a distorted view of God and to change the damaging ways the church has engaged with women.

**Biblical Language for God**

In order to better understand God-language, it is important to discern the ways in which gender is identified, both in biblical languages and in English. Our manner of referring to God can be linguistically divided into two groups: grammatical and lexical. Grammatical identifiers are features that use gender-specific parts of speech, such as gendered pronouns, articles, or verbs. In English, these gender designators are limited to singular pronouns such as “he,” “she,” and “herself.” However, the biblical languages utilize far more gendered designators, and Greek, unlike Hebrew or Aramaic, has gender neutral identifiers as well. Hebrew and Aramaic have gender-specific forms of pronouns, suffixes, adjectives, participles, and verbs. Greek has gender-specific forms of pronouns, adjectives, participles, and articles.

In contrast, lexical gender identification uses words, as opposed to forms of or parts of words, that have a meaning specifically related to gender, such as “father” or “give birth.” Such language implies gender but does not always refer to a person who is the same gender as the lexical identifier implies. Cases where the subject’s natural gender or grammatical gender, or both, do not match the lexical language (including cases in which the subject has no gender) are called cross-gender imagery. In biblical languages, the grammatical features are largely independent of the occurrence of lexical cross-gender imagery.

Concerning lexical gender, when referring to God using a metaphor that has a sex, such as a person (e.g., a king) or animal (e.g., a hen), one must be careful about transferring gender assumptions from the metaphor to God. Concerning grammatical gender, Gail Ramshaw-Schmidt notes that, “in languages with grammatical gender there is no actual significance in gender designation” since inanimate objects are assigned a grammatical gender as well. Thus a table being gendered female, for example, does not indicate sex. Rather it is a construct of the language. Therefore, in God-language, the gender of the divine should not be assumed on the basis of grammatical gender since God is not human.

In fact, God must by nature be gender-transcendent. For God, not being human (see, e.g., Num 23:19), and being beyond human understanding (see, e.g., Isa 55:8–9; Rom 11:33–36) cannot be contained in human language or categories such as gender.

**Symbolic Language**

The only way humans can talk about God is through symbolic language. Emmanuel Kaniyamparampil explains, “The limitations of human language . . . demand the use of symbols and images. Symbols have the capacity to open up various new realms of meaning,” and invisible realities become more accessible to human understanding through the use of observable symbols. Rather than define an infinite God, symbols help connect humanity to the divine through knowable imagery. Even a title as fundamental as “God the Father” does not describe the essence of God, but is metaphorical language “indicating only a relation of origin.” The language we use to describe God does not change God, but it does affect the way we understand and interact with God. When we limit our symbols, we lessen the aspects of God that can be revealed to us. Our ability to understand the fullness of God shrinks or swells with our language.

This symbolic language can be organized into two categories: metaphorical and analogical. Metaphorical God-language makes a statement about what God is and what God is not. All metaphorical language must be contradictory. In her essay “The Gender of God,” Ramshaw-Schmidt uses the example of “rock” from the Psalms to demonstrate the antithetical nature of metaphorical language: “God is a rock: but of course God is not a rock.” The same is true of anthropomorphic metaphors, a kind of metaphorical language in which God is described with human characteristics. God can be called a man, a woman, or a whole people, but in actuality God is not any of these symbols.

While metaphorical language draws a comparison, analogy is more explicit. Analogical language, however, will always represent God incompletely. Neither can analogical language be negated. For example, one can say “God is good” but cannot contradict the statement by saying “But God is not actually good.” Nevertheless, there is an understanding that the word “good” does not fully encompass God nor fully explain what one means when one says “God is good.”

Understanding the nature and function of symbolic God-language helps facilitate acceptance of unfamiliar God imagery.
It also makes apparent when the language Christians use inhibits a full representation of God. In the Bible, numerous examples of cross-gender imagery and feminine representations of divinity are largely ignored today.

**Feminine Imagery for God**

In the OT, God is predominantly described using masculine grammatical language. However, there are a number of cases where God is described lexically using female imagery. The following are a few examples:

- **Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, “carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child, to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors”?** (Num 11:12 NRSV)

- **As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.** (Isa 66:13 NRSV)

- **You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth.** (Deut 32:18 NRSV)

Notably, all these examples of OT cross-gender imagery use the image of God as a mother. Each of these uses, however, is distinct and adds nuance to the picture of God being like a mother. Numbers 11:12 touches on female creative power and the life-giving element of motherhood. Isaiah 66:13 depicts God as a mother in a comforting sense, which is perhaps more familiar to many modern Christians. Deuteronomy 32:18 is an especially interesting passage regarding cross-gender imagery; this passage imagines God as both mother and father in the same thought. The truths of God as mother and God as father, God as feminine and God as masculine, are held in tension. In acknowledging that tension, a further truth about God can be affirmed—that gender hierarchy does not derive from God's character.

Although less common, there are a few instances of cross-gender imagery in the NT as well. The phrase “born of God” is used in 1 John 4:7. It is a lexically feminine image. Additionally, 1 Pet 2:2–3 states, “Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk so that by it you may grow into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good” (NRSV). Describing Christians as newborn babies craving milk, with the Lord being the source of the spiritual milk, clearly suggests breastfeeding. This passage can therefore be interpreted as an image of God as a mother.

The above examples demonstrate how God is lexically given feminine attributes in the Bible. In these images, however, God maintains some masculine characterization. In contrast, there are some Christian traditions where aspects of God are personified, or characterized, as feminine.

In the ancient Syriac Christian tradition, for example, the Holy Spirit is characterized as feminine. This feminine characterization has its roots in Hebrew grammar. The Hebrew word for “spirit” is ruakh, which is grammatically feminine. The Syriac word for “spirit,” ruha, maintains this feminine identity. Additionally, a primary action of the Holy Spirit, “to hover” (rakhaf), is also conjugated as grammatically feminine. Further, the act of hovering has a connotation of the action of a mother bird.11 Rakhaf is used in Deut 32:11 to describe the way God cares for the Israelites in the desert. This same verb is in Gen 1:2, “the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters,” which is where Syriac Christians first make the connection to the Holy Spirit.12

Similarly, a feminine Wisdom figure is prominent in Proverbs.13 However, unlike other examples of female imagery in the Bible, Wisdom (Hebrew hokhmah, Greek sophia) is described as working with God, rather than as a metaphor to describe a characteristic of God. In Prov 8, Wisdom speaks:

> The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. . . . When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above . . . I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race. And now, my children, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways. Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it. . . . For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord; but those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death. (Prov 8:22–36 NRSV)

Though it is not clear in English, the grammar of this passage in Hebrew is feminine and describes a feminine persona. Sophia is described as being created by God and present at the creation of the world. This female embodiment of divine creative force can be found in the visions and writings of Saint Hildegard of Bingen, a renowned medieval mystic and theologian. Hildegard's visions of the female form do not simply ascribe feminine characteristics to the Divine, but are multi-symbolic representatives of the Divine Being.14 The most significant symbol Hildegard uses is Wisdom. In one vision she describes that the “sweeping wings of Wisdom surround and sanctify the cosmic power of life itself,” demonstrating the unity between the created universe and the Divine, represented here as Sophia from Proverbs.15 Wisdom is not merely like a woman in the way that some OT passages describe God, Divine Wisdom is imagined as an actual woman.

Additionally, this image of Wisdom is often connected to Christ as Logos, or the Word.16 The opening statement of the Gospel of John shows the Word, revealed in 1:14 to be Christ,17 as present with God in Creation.

“The Word” in John’s prologue is the Greek word Logos. Early orthodox theologians, such as Justin Martyr and Augustine, use Sophia, Sapientia (Latin for “wisdom”) and Logos interchangeably, even specifically identifying Christ as Sophia in some cases. For example, Athanasius, a bishop of Alexandria, Egypt, in the fourth century, writes “The Wisdom [Sophia]
Women are created in the image of God, just as men are. Both men and women reflect the Divine equally and fully; neither men nor women are lacking because they are not the other sex.

Ramifications for the Church

By and large, the modern church has lost its balance of masculine and feminine language to talk about God. Frequently, God is only referred to as a male figure, and this limiting language is defended. For example, the Christian Reformed Church in North America asserts that only masculine names may be used for God and any feminine imagery must be used explicitly in its biblical context. Not only does this mindset ignore the function of symbolic God-language, it assumes that God must exist within the human gender binary. On the contrary, God, not being human, and being beyond human understanding, cannot be contained in human language.

To simplify the infinite and transcendent existence of a distinctly non-human God to a single label is not only inaccurate, but damaging. Intentionally expanding the language and imagery churches and Christians use to talk about God does not change the essence of who God is. For example, to choose to call God “mother” does nothing to alter God. Nor does expanding our language further limit or define God. Rather, to continue this example, to call God “mother” opens a new door of connection with God. Essentially everyone has a mother or mother figure whose relationship they can draw from in this God-symbol. Additionally, many people are mothers and can connect to God on a maternal level. Thus, this example of God as Mother has demonstrated a way in which feminine imagery, already present in the Bible, can be used in a beautiful way that further connects the human experience to the Divine.

In contrast, when churches hold so tightly to the God-as-male image, it become distorted and negatively affects the way Christians interact with one another, particularly with women. Power distortions occur when “male monotheism constructs the human side of the God-human love relationship as female.” One example of this dynamic is evident in Christian interpretations of Song of Solomon. Sometimes Christians read this poem as a metaphor of the love between God and the church, with the church as the bride. The NT imagery of the church as the Bride of Christ plays into this as well. This God-as-male imagery translates into earthly interactions between men and women. As a result, women are forced into a position inferior to that of men in the church. An additional implication of the God-as-male belief system is that the natural order of things is for women to be submissive. Humankind is to be submissive to the will of God; when God is male and human is female in this power hierarchy then the same must be true on the earth. Women in general must then be submissive to men in general because that is the natural order.

Consequently, only acknowledging God-as-male imagery weakens women’s connection with the Divine. Exclusive God-as-male language, whether intended to be taken literally or not, implies that women are lesser. In other words, because God is male, men are somehow more reflective of the Divine than women are.

However, women are created in the image of God, just as men are (Gen 1:27). Both men and women reflect the Divine equally and fully; neither men nor women are lacking because they are not the other sex. What logically follows is that God cannot be only represented in one gender if both reflect God equally. Therefore, to diminish half of humankind created in the image of God is to blind ourselves to divine realities that we might otherwise engage or that may be revealed. A selection from Ramshaw-Schmidt’s article, “De Divinis Nominibus: The Gender of God,” summarizes my argument for wider God-language:

Theological sensitivity in explicating analogical language frees us from distortions and helps point to the glory of God. If we would grant often in our speech that “he” is wholly inadequate as a personal pronoun in referring to God, much of our difficulty would be lessened. Instead, we hear vociferous defense of this masculine designation, as if it were in some way true.

When the church lacks sensitivity to the symbolic nature of God-language, it crafts God in its own image. In this case, that image is male. By acknowledging that language about God is metaphoric or analogical, these tightly held, partial imaginings of God are easier to let go of, and, as a result, the church opens itself to fuller symbolism. In other words, “opening up God language will combat the incipient idolatry in one’s traditional speech.”

To combat this idolatry and to acknowledge the gender-transcendence of God, some churches, to varying degrees, have opted for entirely gender-neutral God-language. Nevertheless, church life and language are still dominated by male imagery. Additionally, since the common understanding is simply that God is male with some traditionally feminine attributes, gender-neutral language does nothing to rectify this bias. Gender-neutral language does not recognize that male has become the default image. A complex library that includes feminine language and imagery is necessary to repair the modern, lacking image of God in many churches.

Conclusion

In summation, God is not bound by the confines of human language, let alone grammatical structures. Rather, God is infinite, transcendent, and not human. Indeed, God created
gender. God can only be talked about using symbolism, and even then this language is incomplete. Unfortunately, human grammar and tradition have distorted the gender-transcendent image of God in the modern church. God is commonly seen as solely masculine and even male; the rich feminine imagery of the Bible and of the early church is missing or, at best, minimized. This imbalance distorts the view of women in the church and can cause them to be treated as spiritual inferiors, rather than as equal image-bearers of God. Broadening God-language has the potential to begin changing the toxic gender hierarchy in the church. Incorporating feminine imagery into the church’s God-language will help men and women together form a fuller, richer, and more biblical imagining of God and one another.

Notes

3. This is, of course, not including the historical Jesus as God incarnate. Jesus was male while living on the earth. However, as I will discuss later in this paper, since Christ is God, the eternal Christ is also gender transcendent.
4. “God is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind” (Num 23:19a NRSV); “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord” (Isa 55:8 NRSV); “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Rom 11:33 NRSV).
9. The NIV demonstrates this more clearly, saying “who fathered you,” as opposed to “who bore you” in the NRSV.
12. Kaniyamparampil notes that another probable connection of “hovering” and the Spirit is made in the NT during “the Spirit-dove’s appearance over the waters of the Jordan at Christ’s baptism.” “Feminine-Maternal Images,” 171.
17. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us ...” (NRSV).