

In recent years, in response to biblical scholarship like Tribble's, a number of linguists and other specialists have worked out a three-volume series of yearly Bible readings, *An Inclusive Language Lectionary*, for use in worship services or for personal study. In it, when it seems contextually accurate to do so, traditional generic language is broadened to include women. It also uses experimental phrases like "God the Father [and Mother]."

3. In my opinion, objections to such usages are rooted primarily in the fact that sexism is still pervasive in our hearts. For conservative Christians to think of God as maternal as well as paternal sounds like a denigration: a motherly God is less powerful, less sovereign, less important.

So, to begin with, we have to acknowledge that God is not a genderized Being in any anthropomorphic sense and that therefore male pronouns like *he* and *his* for God are really just as inaccurate as female pronouns like *she* and *her*. Nor would neuter pronouns (*it*, *its*) solve the problem. If we think of adjectives or traits stereotypically associated with terms like "masculine" and "feminine," the implications of the secondary or inferior status of the female characterizations are even more evident. We want a God who is strong, direct, initiatory, working on our behalf in the real world, able to provide for us, and so on.

Keeping those three considerations in mind—that language is necessarily metaphorical; that God's nature defies the categories of human gender; and that a subtle sexism probably colors our "instinctual" response to many ordinary words—it does not seem unacceptable to me to follow the example of Jesus and speak of God as Father. I choose to do that.

Perhaps the parental appellation is the one our human minds can most readily relate to, since it is inherently personal. If our human father was not the parent we might have wished for in his treatment of us, it helps to know that God is like, and is profoundly superior to, the best of fathers. Similarly, if our human mother failed us in situations that would have enabled us to have a more propitious start in life, it helps to know that God's care for us is profoundly superior to the care of the best of mothers.

To describe God only in impersonal or functional terms—creator, sovereign, king—is not so directly applicable to our individual experience. Further, even a human person is much more than what he or she does.

Likewise, God is more than whatever functional designation we might come up with to describe the divine nature and ways.

Years ago British scholar Donald MacKay, a professor of communication at the University of Keele, alerted Christians to the hazards of what he called "nothing-buttery" thinking: "Religion is nothing but . . ." "God is merely . . ." If we can also avoid the nothing-buttery fallacy in our understanding of what God is like, no matter what words we use, we will avoid worshiping a false image: a God who is too small.

This article was adapted from, "God Language: Some Personal Reflections," in Catalyst: A Form for Scriptural Christianity Within the United Methodist Church, March 1989, p. 2. Used by permission.

The two sources mentioned were: Phyllis Tribble, God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality (Fortress, 1984), and Donald M. MacKay, Christianity in a Mechanistic Universe (InterVarsity, 1966).

IMAGING GOD: ANOTHER EVANGELICAL PERSPECTIVE

Kari Cunningham Ifland

Have you ever felt uncomfortable in a church service because of the overwhelming number of masculine references to God? Have you ever found yourself changing the words to a hymn as you sing in order to be more inclusive? Have you ever found yourself counting the number of times a masculine reference is spoken, prayed or sung versus the times a feminine one is used? You will if you read Paul R. Smith's *Is It Okay To Call God "Mother: Considering the Feminine Face of God"* (Hendrickson, 1993). An evangelical pastor of a Southern Baptist church for thirty years, Smith has led his congregation through nine major changes; the most recent one has been to recognize "the feminine face of God." In his book, Smith thoroughly explores this issue, its importance, and objections to it; then he offers practical advice to implement change in the church today.

Smith calls eleven o'clock on Sunday mornings "the most sexist hour in America." Not only are women

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excluded from leadership in most evangelical church services, but the feminine "side" of God which they were created to image is never presented.

The problem, according to Smith, is that many evangelical public worship services present a distorted picture of God. If masculine language for God is used predominantly, in exclusion of feminine imagery, we are stating, both explicitly and implicitly, that "God is exclusively masculine or male. This in turn appears to make men more like God than women are." Smith writes with three purposes in mind: to expand our image of God; to recognize that calling God "Mother" is biblical, beneficial and significant; and to understand the need for corporate recognition of the biblically-based masculine *and* feminine images of God.

One objection to including feminine God-language in worship services is that the Bible never refers to God as a woman. This assumption is false. Smith discusses over thirty biblical references to feminine imagery for God. He calls them "Bible verses you never memorized." He questions why allegorical metaphors used only once in Scripture, like "Lily of the Valley" or "Rose of Sharon," are quite easily used in song and speech about Jesus, while "in spite of numerous references in the Scripture to God as a maternal figure and a woman in labor," as well as others, feminine images of God are still shunned.

Smith answers other objections to calling God "Mother" including: Jesus called God Father, not Mother; patriarchy is grounded in God's very Being shown in the Trinity ruled by God the Father; and if women are leaders and God is "Mother," we end up with a "feminine" church which is distasteful to men. Smith then explores the reasons for the strong reactions against feminine God-language, addressing issues such as fear of role confusion, fear of losing God as Father, and the image of women as evil. He offers biblical insight into the reasons for such reactions through a study of Acts 15.

Recognizing the biblical feminine imagery for God is directly linked with men and women sharing all church roles and functions, including leadership. Smith proposes that as long as the feminine imagery for God is suppressed, women will continue to be considered less capable leaders because they are considered somehow less like God than men.

Smith concludes his book with practical advice from his experience of leading his church through this change. He has laid out a course of action to effect

change which includes those who are more than eager to follow as well as those who are, at best, reluctant. Smith believes this issue to be "the most pressing theological and social agenda in the American church today" because it affects each of us, male and female, in profound ways. It determines the kind of God we worship and serve and know.

Can the church embrace feminine imagery for God and still remain true to its orthodox/evangelical beliefs? I believe it must if it is to minister in a meaningful way today and in the future. Paul Smith's insights can help us on our way.



SALUTE TO RUTH BOLYARD, SUPER VOLUNTEER

From September of 1989 until March of 1995, CBE has been richly blessed by the ministry of Ruth Bolyard. She moved from Michigan to Minnesota in order to assume a position as chapters coordinator. She was by far our outstanding volunteer, giving of her time, energies, and personal resources.

Under her capable leadership, we grew from a total of three chapters to over thirty-five. Many of us recall the wonderful chapters recognition nights that she staged at the 1991 and 1993 conferences. We were also deeply appreciative of her efforts to set up a communications system between the chapters.

Ruth established chapters not only in America but in Germany, Czechoslovakia, Norway, Ireland, Australia and South Africa. During the summer of 1993, she organized a highly successful CBE conference at Schloss Mittersill in Austria. She has been indefatigable in correspondence, encouraging people around the world as they struggle with issues of biblical equality. Through her contacts with others, her warm, loving spirit shone through and became a practical demonstration of the grace of Christ. Many of our chapter leaders know well how much time, effort and kindness she expended on their behalf. She is greatly missed by many of us, and we wish her God's richest blessings.