

The Parable of the Blue Reflector

*Let us point the way to signs of racism and exclusion
that are often not seen by those not affected by them.*

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IT WAS A WARM, SUNNY SUNDAY MORNING AND GIBSON AND I were outside playing kickball. It was one of his favorite activities, and playing with him was one of mine. In the middle of an enthusiastic kick, Gibson stopped abruptly and said, "Aunt Nancy, look! There is a blue reflector!" I was amazed to discover that there was a blue reflector embedded in the concrete. I had walked by, driven over, and played ball around this spot on the parking lot hundreds of times. I had never seen the blue reflector. Gibson asked, "Where is the fire hydrant?" I still did not make the connection. My young instructor continued, "The blue reflector lets the firefighters know where to look for a fire hydrant. Look, there it is!" And there it was. The fire hydrant on the corner was across from the blue reflector.

For days after this lesson on blue reflectors from my four-year-old teacher, I saw blue reflectors everywhere. I have driven the streets of Dallas since 1940. I had never noticed the blue reflectors, but there they were, marking the locations of fire hydrants day or night.

There are at least two lessons to be learned from the Parable of the Blue Reflector¹: one, always be open to learning, no matter the age of your teacher (*The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them*² [Isa. 11:6]); and two, once our awareness is raised, we see blue reflectors where we saw none before. (*For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!* Mark 4:22–23.) For now, I want to focus on the second lesson.

For eleven years I worked with the U.S. Department of Justice, Community Relations Service.³ As an Anglo woman, I had a lot to learn about the subtle and sometimes not so subtle ways people are excluded from access to resources and participation in the decision-making processes of community life. I learned to see the blue reflectors. The signs of exclusion and discrimination were always there, but I had not always had eyes to see and ears to hear. I began to notice times when I arrived for services and was served before others who had been waiting longer but were of an ethnic minority group. I became more aware of times that community leaders spoke disparagingly about minority leaders when they were not present. I became more aware of the times my friends and family members told jokes that diminished others based on race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. Nothing had really changed in my environment, but I had trustworthy guides that were able to point out the blue reflectors of racism and exclusion.

On a more personal note, I became aware of the blue

reflectors of gender bias in business, personal, and church life. As a woman in business I have presented myself based on competence and integrity. I have not been willing to be defined by my gender. However, I began to notice when I shared an insight in a group where I was the only woman, the insight was often not heard. Literally, not heard. When one of the men shared the same insight it was responded to and discussed. I learned to compensate for this by stating and restating information until it was heard.

I am not trying to diminish the integrity of the men with whom I have worked. I don't think they were any more aware of the exclusive nature of their environment than I was of the blue reflectors on the streets of Dallas. My goal is to point the way to signs of racism and exclusion that are often not seen by those not affected by them.

The subject of inclusive and exclusive language in church literature and music will always start a lively discussion. The main argument for the continuing use of exclusive language is that we know "he" means "he and she" and that "father" includes "mother" and that "brother" refers to "brother and sister." I remember thinking the

same thing until the blue reflectors of gender bias were pointed out to me. Language has power, and when one gender is excluded through language, it is easier to overlook exclusion in behaviors and attitudes.

The Declaration of Independence of the United States of America declares that "all men are created equal." This did not mean women. Women did not have the right to vote or own property or pursue their independent happiness. African Americans, male or female, were considered property, so they were not included in the language of the Declaration of Independence as being created equal. As a society, we have come to believe that all *people* are created equal and have a right to pursue their independent happiness. Our language needs to be consistent with our beliefs.

Evidence that our society does not accept the disclaimer that "he" means "he and she" is in our public language. *Policeman* does not represent the reality that men and women serve. *Fireman* is no longer adequate to represent the women and men who protect our homes and lives from the devastation of fire in the role of firefighters. Even the Department of Transportation realizes that "WATCH FOR FLAGGER AHEAD" represents the reality that there are men and women using flags to direct traffic.

I notice the blue reflectors now, and when the church sings, "Good Christian Men, Rejoice," that does not mean me. When the brothers are asked to join in prayer, I am excluded from the family circle of prayer. When inclusive

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God As Mother: A Translator's Challenge

Jacob A. Loewen's recent book *The Bible in Cross-Cultural Perspective* covers a multitude of subjects—heaven, earth, the afterlife, the spirit world, exorcism, among them. Of particular interest to *Priscilla Papers* readers is chapter 9, “Images of God: Male, Female, or Both” (pp. 109–16). It is packed with wonderful information regarding inclusive language. Here are excerpts:

In the West, one controversial worldview issue concerning the nature of God in the Bible and in Christian faith focuses [on] male and female metaphors for God.

When my wife and I became missionaries to the Waunana, we were pleased not only because the people had only one God, but also because he was male, like our own God. Even after I had become a translation consultant . . . I felt that translators should use a masculine name for God. Not until I came into contact with the Peve (Chad, central Africa)—for whom the only deity was a female God, with no alternative—was I forced to rethink my position and study the Scriptures on this issue.

The word for God in Peve literally means “our mother” (Venberg 1971:68–70). If we are to take this name for God seriously, expressions like “our father in heaven” should be translated as “our mother in heaven” in the Peve language. But is this possible?

The missionaries answered “No!” and insisted on using “our father in heaven” in their preaching and in the translation of the Scriptures. To the Peve this was something like having the missionaries insist that they call their own mothers “father,” or their own sisters “brother,” or their own daughters “son.” What kind of foreign nonsense was that? The Peve refused to accept either the missionaries' message or the Scriptures. A male God was a foreign deity, and they wanted to have no part of him.

In many Bantu languages a similar kind of linguistic violence has been perpetrated on the Spirit of God. . . . Once the local church became independent, widespread reaction arose against the grotesque distortion which foreigners had imposed on their language.

On the other hand, missionaries have sometimes seem-

The Bible in Cross-Cultural Perspective

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ingly succeeded in changing God's sex. Mawu was a female deity in Ewe and other related languages in Ghana, Togo, and Benin, but under German missionary influence she was converted into a male. . . .

As a Bible Society representative, I could not escape the responsibility of knowing for myself what name for God was used in the Scriptures I approved for publication and by what means such a name was selected. Prompted by this cross-cultural dilemma, I was forced to establish my own premises on the basis of which I could decide what the Bible was actually depicting on the subject.

Loewen goes on to discuss cultural and linguistic reasons for the strong images of God as male in the Bible, how metaphors and figures of speech are the product of a cultural milieu, and how grammar and figures of speech serve as a grid that blocks our view of the dimensions of the truth. He concludes:

[M]y present understanding of God is much richer as a result [of my cross-cultural examination of the possibility of female names and images for God in the Bible]. I found that the names and metaphors for God are equally appropriate whether male, female, or both, and as a result my vision of God has deepened. I saw that the metaphors we use to express our dim understanding of deity tend later to be taken literally and become solidified into dogma. But no metaphor can picture all of the reality it represents. As a result of these discoveries, my God is not as small as before.

This is wonderfully affirming, and even more encouraging when you examine Loewen's notes and bibliography—which don't include references to known egalitarian authors. That should make it difficult for those opposed to the use of egalitarian or inclusive language to claim that Loewen was unduly influenced in his findings for this book by “feminists.” Rather, the author says he came to his conclusions from his study of Scripture—praise God! ■

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language is used appropriately and consistently it need not offend anyone. Those who are not aware of the gender bias of exclusive language are seldom bothered by gender-inclusive language. Those who are aware of the blue reflectors of gender bias know immediately they are with people who value male and female equally when inclusive language is used.

Be open to learning. Be willing to seek trusted guides who are able to point out the blue reflectors of racism, bias, and exclusion that you may have been unaware of in your world. Follow the model of Jesus, who included the marginalized people of his society: women, children, Samaritans. Listen to the counsel of Paul, whose vision often transcended his practice. “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer

male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:27–28). Be one who communicates through word and deed that the circle of God's grace is ever-expanding and ever-inclusive. ■

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Endnotes

1. Copyright © 2000, Nancy K. Ferrell, Professional Services & Education, Dallas.
2. Scripture references are from The New Revised Standard Version, 1989.
3. The Community Relations Service was established by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to provide assistance to communities and persons in resolving disputes relating to discriminatory practices based on race, color, or national origin.