What Language Shall We Use

A look at inclusive language for people, feminine images for God, and gender-accurate Bible translations.

MIMI HADDAD

RECENT EVENTS IN THE EVANGELICAL COMMUNITY—PARTICULARLY WITH THE RELEASE OF TODAY’S NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION (TNIV) BIBLE TRANSLATION—HAVE RAISED CONCERNS OVER MASCUINE LANGUAGE. DOES JESUS ASK US TO BE FISHERS OF PEOPLE OR FISHERS OF MEN? (MATTHEW 4:19)? IS THERE A DIFFERENCE? SHOULD WE BE AFRAID TO USE WORDS LIKE PEOPLE, especially when the ancient text and context warrant this?

And what about language for God? May Christians use feminine images for God? The historical church did—and they had a biblical precedent to do so. What about the hymns we sing, the liturgy we recite, or even our church bulletins or newsletters? Should we use gender-accurate language?

In this brief review, I will consider three issues: (1) the language we use for people; (2) the language we use for God; and (3) the use of gender-accurate language in Bible translation. I will also consider the feminine language used for God by the historical church, and language for God as noted in Scripture and the example of Jesus.

Inclusive language for people. Until perhaps fifty years ago, it was somewhat common in America to use male pronouns when speaking of both men and women. Women, however, constantly needed to ask themselves, “Does man, men, he, or him include me?” Christians have understood that the word men included them in hymns such as “Good Christian Men, Rejoice,” “Rise Up, O Men of God,” or “God of Our Fathers.” At the same time, when the church bulletin reads: “You are invited to the men’s breakfast,” we understand that does not include everyone. And the word Men on the restroom door is not an inclusive term! Gender accuracy is an important consideration.

The use of gender-accurate language in Bible translation. While the ancient languages often use masculine terms inclusively or generically, most Bible scholars today realize that to translate such words in masculine terms is confusing to modern ears. Consider a text such as Romans 3:28:

NIV: For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

TNIV: For we maintain that a person is justified by faith, that young woman may not receive this message. We need to make sure that God’s Word is allowed to speak to today’s readers of English. The Greek word is anthropos, which, while it can be translated as man, is more accurately translated today as person when the context indicates that meaning.

Let us now turn to language for God.

Scriptural metaphors for God. The Bible uses a rich variety of images, names, and metaphors for God. These many images enhance the usual names for God—such as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. While some in the following list of metaphors for God may seem odd, they are all found in the biblical record. We will begin with the more abstract images and metaphors, then move toward those that attribute human qualities to God:

**Rock, fortress, and shield:** “The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold” (Ps. 18:2).

**Light and stronghold:** “The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?” (Ps. 27:1).

**Moth and rot:** “I am like a moth to Ephraim, like rot to the people of Judah” (Hosea 13:6–8a).

**Shade at your right hand:** “The Lord is the shade at your right hand” (Ps. 121:5b).

**Shepherd:** “He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young” (Isaiah 40:11).

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present, like moths and the smell of rot. God is the shade on our right hand, offering reprieve and rest from the heat.

Feminine imagery for God

The church today often overlooks biblical, yet feminine language for God. We rely almost exclusively on male metaphors and images for God, a departure not only from Scripture but also from the historical church. Though we rarely hear references to these in churches today, they are part of the biblical record. Given the patriarchal culture of Scripture, it is interesting that we have so many feminine references to God.

God as a mother bird: “[H]ide me in the shadow of your wings . . .” (Ps. 17:8b). “May you be richly rewarded by the Lord the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge” (Ruth 2:12).

God as a she-bear: “Like a bear robbered of her cubs, I will attack them and rip them open” (Hosea 13:8a).

God as a midwife: “Yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you . . .” (Ps. 22:9).

God as a mother hen: Jesus said, “[H]ow often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings” (Matt. 23:37b).

God as a woman looking for her lost coin: “Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:8–10).

God as a woman baking bread: “Again he asked, ‘What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough’” (Luke 13:20–21).

Mother images for God. May we image God as mother? The following verses speak of God using maternal terms.


Hosea 13:8: “Like a bear robbed of her cubs, I will attack them and rip them open.”

Isaiah 46:3–4: “[Y]ou whom I have upheld since you were conceived, and have carried since your birth. Even to your old age and grey hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.”

Isaiah 66:13: “As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you.”

Job 38:29: “From whose womb comes the ice? Who gives birth to the frost from the heavens...?”

Psalm 90:2: “Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world . . . .”

Hosea 11:3–4: “It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kind-

ness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them.”

Other considerations. Holy Spirit (in Hebrew is feminine, ruah; in Greek, neuter) is frequently associated with the birthing process (John 3:5; cf. John 1:13, 1 John 4:7b; 5:1, 4, 18). Some ancient Christian traditions, such as the Syriac church, refer to the Holy Spirit as mother. A “fourteenth-century fresco depicting the Trinity at a church near Munich, Germany, images the Holy Spirit as feminine.”

Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf called the Holy Spirit mother.

El Shaddai is considered by some a maternal name for God as it stems from the word shad, which means mountain or perhaps breast. W. F. Albright likewise suggested that shadu, the root of the word El Shaddai, may mean breast.

El Shaddai, an image of nurturance and sustenance, is used for God six times in Genesis (17:1, 28:3, 35:11; 43:14; 48:3; 49:25). It may be connected to the notion of God’s fertility and blessings of the human race. “May God Almighty [El Shaddai] bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers . . .” (Gen. 28:3). “I am God Almighty [El Shaddai]; be fruitful and increase in number” (Gen. 35:11). “By the Almighty [El Shaddai] who will bless you with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that lies beneath, blessings of the breasts [shadaqim] and of the womb [racham]” (Gen. 49:25).

I Am Who I Am: Consider also the Bible’s self-naming of God: “I AM WHO I AM” (Exod. 3:14). I Am Who I Am circumvents the limitations implicit in a gender pronoun through the use of the first person.

No graven images: “For I am God and not a human being” (‘is; Hosea 11:9b); “God is not human.” (‘is; Num. 23:19). “Therefore watch yourselves very carefully, so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman, or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air . . .” (Deut. 4:15b–17).

Jesus called God Father: In Jesus’ day the function of fathers was to impart inheritance, protection, and to provide for their children. Christ also called God Abba, or “Daddy,” a term that implied intimacy and trust. Though Jesus referred to God as Father and Abba, these terms do not teach or imply the preeminence of males. Like all language used for God, a relational term such as Father helps us understand a heavenly principle: that through Christ, God is our Father too, and Christ brings us into an intimate relationship with God, and thus we are coheirs with Christ, inheriting God’s kingdom.

The limits of language

Ultimately, God cannot be fully defined by words, because words are finite and God is infinite. Because God is limitless and we are limited we can never hope to fully grasp all of God. While the Bible provides revelation that is necessary and sufficient for faith, for anyone to claim a complete
understanding of God is insanity, according to G. K. Chesterton. All those who attempt to place all of God in their head will discover their head bursts.

God is self-revealed in terms we can understand in our own experiences, as inanimate objects and sometimes using gender. We should not, however, make these metaphors—these implicit comparisons—absolute. We cannot lock into metaphors as theological absolutes, to render God as male or female. God is not limited by gender, because God is Spirit.

Perhaps this is why Scripture offers varied images and metaphors that express our infinite God: wisdom, liberator, judge, rock, moth, she-bear, and so on. Because a metaphor is an implicit comparison, it is often far more complex than a direct comparison. A metaphor says something that can be said in no other way. Metaphors retain the tension of the “is and is not.” God is our rock; yet God is not a physical rock. God is our father; yet God is not our biological father. God is also not our mother, for God is neither female nor male.

People who worshiped various gods that were both male and female surrounded the ancient Jews. Therefore the concept of God as father was rare in the Old Testament. It was Jesus who spoke of God as Father, or Abba. Perhaps the Jews avoided calling God father or mother lest the image be taken literally. They used expressions such as “God of our fathers” but not “God the Father.”

It is idolatry to make God male or female. God is no more female or goddess (as some radical feminists would argue) than God is male. God is beyond gender. Yet, though we may speak of God as father or as mother, God is not limited by fatherhood or motherhood.

As males and females we bear God’s image. Both are needed to image God, and neither gender alone images God adequately. Some say men are more in the image of God; however, this is not biblical. God, who created both male and female in his image, can be understood using images of either gender. But if we insist that God is male, that is idolatry, and we’ve made God in our image, which is contrary to Scripture. Those who say that women more adequately reflect the image of God are again making God in our image, which is idolatrous according to Scripture.

**Jesus was male**

There are some who say that because Jesus was male, God therefore is male. Christ became incarnate in human flesh. He became your flesh and my flesh, or, as Romans 8:3 says: “For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful humanity to be a sin offering.” It was Christ’s humanity, not his gender, that made him humankind’s redeemer.

Thus, God is neither feminine nor masculine (gender); God is neither male nor female (sex). God, who is transcendent Spirit, possesses no physical body. Yet God accommodates to human limitations by using physical, relational, and gender-laden images for self-disclosure. Some of those are feminine. Inasmuch as God inspired the biblical authors to use both feminine and masculine images for God, we too may use feminine images for God.

**Christian history**

As we seek to follow biblical examples, let us also affirm the consistent witness of church tradition. Throughout the history of the church, some faithful Christians did in fact speak of God in motherly terms. This may seem odd to us. Yet, since the Bible uses feminine images for God, the patristic and medieval church grafted itself into this biblical tradition.

Ambrose, Chrysostom, Origen, Irenaeus, and Augustine all describe God in maternal terms. The most extensive documentation of God as mother comes from Caroline Walker Bynum in her book *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of High Middles Ages*. Bynum cites patristic sources (Clement, Origen, Irenaeus, John Chrysostom, Ambrose, and Augustine) and monastic writers such as Bernard of Clairvaux, all of whom refer to God as mother.

Others include Gregory of Nyssa (395), The Venerable Bede (673–735), Peter Lombard (1110–64), Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), Mechtilde of Magdeburg, (1210–80), St. Bonaventure (1221–74), Catherine of Siena (1347–80), Martin Luther (1483–1546) and Count Zinzendorf (1700–60). How did these notable Christians refer to God in the feminine?

**Clement of Alexandria** (A.D. 215) wrote the following: “This is our nourishment, the milk flowing from the father by which alone we little ones are fed. . . . Therefore, we fly trustfully to the ‘care-banishing breast’ of God the father; the breast that is the Word, who is the only one who can truly bestow on us the milk of love. Only those who nurse at the breast are blessed . . . little ones who seek the Word, the craved-for-milk is given from the Father’s breasts of love for man.”

“The Word [Christ] is everything to His little ones, both father and mother.”

**Bernard of Clairvaux** (1090–53) wrote this about the maternal aspects of God: “Do not let the roughness of our life frighten your tender years. If you feel the stings of temptation . . . suck not so much the wounds as the breasts of the Crucified. He will be your mother, and you will be his son . . .”

**Julian of Norwich** (1342–1423) said of God’s motherhood: “As truly as God is our Father, so is truly God our Mother. Our Father wills, our Mother works, our good Lord the Holy Spirit confirms . . . And so Jesus is our true Mother in nature by our first creation, and he is our true
When we resist complementing masculine language for God with biblical yet feminine images for God, and when we oppose inclusive language and gender-accurate translations, we need to ask: Are we saying that God is male and that males are therefore preeminent? We must resist any implication that God is masculine, or that Scripture sanctions patriarchy. While Jesus called God Father, not Mother, yet the Bible as a whole does not advance a superior role for men in church, home, or society. Remember, the term father in biblical times meant one who imparted inheritance. However, when people hear only male metaphors for God, or masculine language in the church, or Bible translations that always render Greek words such as anthropos as men, they are led to ask whether there is something fundamentally wrong with being female, or whether God is “not a respecter of persons.” A mishandling of language not only furthers an unbiblical subordination of women; it blurs the character of God.

If we want to be faithful to the Bible, we will include feminine images for God, just as the Bible does, and as great Christians of the past have done. And if we are to be biblical people, we will use inclusive language, showing that the Bible calls all people, both men and women, to saving faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:28, Titus 2:11, 1 Tim. 2:3–6).

We as the church should rejoice that all people are loved by God and that they can now understand, without language barriers, that the gospel includes them. This is the good news.

Notes
1. This example was used by Sanford Hull during his Inclusive Language workshop, at CBE’s 1991 International Conference.
3. Sanford Hull, op. cit.
10. Ibid., 77.

Editor’s note: The question of whether to translate the Bible so that its inclusive message is perfectly clear is not new. The article here by Bruce Kilmer was first published in the Winter 1999/2000 issue of Integrity magazine (no longer published); the author’s discussion of inclusive language is more relevant now than ever.

Kilmer has updated his original article to include the publication this past year of Today’s New International Version (TNIV).

“If any man come to me . . .” (Luke 14:26; KJV);
“For we would not, brethren, have you ignorant . . .” (2 Cor. 1:8; KJV);
“That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man” (Eph. 3:16; KJV);
“Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord!” (Phil. 3:1; NIV); “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God . . .” (John 1:12; KJV);
“For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God” (Rom. 8:14; KJV);
“God of Our Fathers”
“Good Christian Men, Rejoice”

It is impossible for me to know the full effect on girls and women of a lifetime of hearing masculine nouns and pronouns in contexts and situations that were supposed to include all people and persons. The best I can do is compare it to situations I have experienced when language used did not apply to me or excluded me—such as in school when I knew I wasn’t included in a certain group, or in a foreign country when I knew I was not included in an invitation; or in a gathering of sectarian church members where I knew I was no longer accepted as one of the “real Christians.”

Language does affect our thinking and our sense of who we are. Because both men and women have been conditioned to accept noninclusive language—even deprecating language—we may be unaware of the effects of a lifetime of such language on our psyche. Noninclusive language can make women feel less responsible so that they may leave things up to the men in areas of leadership, discipleship, or even in spiritual matters altogether.

Noninclusive language and actions can cause a lack of esteem for women, such as when a young girl once asked her mom during Communion, “Why are men better than women?” When the mom asked her daughter what made her think that, the daughter replied: “Because women are translated using the word charity, but today such a translation does not communicate the meaning of this passage about love. Similarly today, when both men and women are being referred to, the words person, human being, he and she, and brothers and sisters communicate better than the words man, he, and brethren.

All Things to All People
Why shouldn’t we accurately translate the Bible so it is clear in contexts that include both men and women?

J. Bruce Kilmer


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16. Ibid., 126.
18. Ibid., 40.
21. Ibid., 293.