set of characteristics or images. Our task as humans is simple: we are called to bear witness to the one perfect image of God, not as we think God needs to be witnessed to but as the Word itself comes to us in all its freedom.

The One Word Needed

A final implication has to do with the kinds of words we use in speaking of God. Most of the debate over language about God has revolved around titles or noWs to but as the Word itself comes to us in all its freedom. The One Word Needed

The biblical witness to Jesus Christ is not a list of correct titles but a collection of carefully chosen Gospel narratives surrounded on each side by related narrative and non-narrative writings. The ambiguity of titles and nouns used of God is resolved only when they are related to their appropriate story contexts. It is one thing to name God as father or mother. It is quite another to describe God’s character by retelling what we hear in the story of Jesus speaking publicly with the Samaritan woman, or of Jesus feeding the five thousand, or touching the leper. In the first case, we are left wondering what it means that God is father or mother; or worse, we assume we already know what it means. In the second case, by fixing our attention on the activity of Jesus, we can see the character of God revealed, along with our own character as human beings created in the image of God.

Our language about God will be only as persuasive and illuminating as our language about Jesus Christ. By turning our attention away from the ultimately false choice between father and mother, we may be able once again to focus on the one Word of God that empowers all our words about God and about each other. By returning our concepts about God to their proper narrative context, the biblical witness to the living Word of God, we may discover surprising ways of describing how God relates to us — ways that both affirm and challenge the way we relate to each other.

KEEPING THE RIGHT PERSPECTIVE

Kathleen Hayes

"Rise up, O men of God!" The singing begins at Sunday morning service. I want to go home. I needed some encouragement this morning, and we begin — without apology — with a song that leaves me out.

I know I am not alone, but as a woman I often feel alone. It seems that so few Christians understand the importance of including women in worship and the language of worship and of not speaking of God in solely masculine terms. I am convinced that when we limit our language, we limit God, ourselves, and others. However, in addition to being biblically faithful, making my language inclusive has opened up new ways of experiencing God and the world.

But the world doesn’t always seem to want new ways of thinking. What is a feminist Christian to do?

We can begin by realizing that we are really not all alone. Others in the universal church, both men and women, share our concerns and our pain. They may not be in our congregation, but they are there. And — who knows? — there may be some folks in our own congregations who are open to inclusive language but haven’t yet made all the connections or dared to step forward.

But the bottom line is to remember to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3). Because language always falls short of expressing who God is, what we must seek is to know Jesus Christ and what he tells us of the nature of God.

Pray for God’s guidance on your own journey of faith. You will need to decide what’s best for you to do in a church setting that does not nurture inclusive views. If it is staying at your particular church, don’t use unity as a smoke-screen for not speaking up; but don’t deliberately make language a divisive issue, either — unless God clearly leads in that direction.

For me, a proper perspective means that sometimes it may be loving to point out someone’s use of male language that excludes women; other times, it may be most loving to ignore it and keep focused on the task at hand — be it feeding the hungry, sharing in someone’s struggle and pain no matter how it is being expressed, or worshiping the God I love with those I love. My conviction is that while our language is deeply ingrained and does not usually change overnight, it does change as our awareness changes. In the meantime, I must be patient with my brothers and sisters, remembering that our first and foremost task is to make the kingdom and love of Christ known in our suffering world.

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