

PROTAGONIST CORNER

A New Idolatry?

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It has come upon us gradually--this new idolatry. For years, for centuries, we did not recognize it for what it is. Few of us questioned; we assumed what seemed to be plain truth. God is male. Or at least, to be more sophisticated, God has chosen to reveal himself (sic) as male.

Clearly the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, refer to God with masculine nouns and pronouns and masculine images. While there are occasional feminine images used in reference to God, until recently few have noticed them. An elder was irate when, in a worship service, I referred to the protectiveness of divine love using the image of a mother hen, until I explained that I was quoting an image Jesus used. One can point out that Elohim is basically a feminine word with a masculine plural ending or that the word for Spirit in Hebrew is feminine and in Greek is neuter. But such arguments mean little or nothing until we are willing to confess that all languages and all images are inadequate as names or descriptions of the one who gave no name to Moses and is revealed as an infant in diapers and a political criminal on a cross. There is a sense in which the name of God must always be as unpronounceable to us as YHWH was to the Israelites. There is a sense in which any language about God is idolatrous.

Yet, most of us, whatever linguistic theories we may know or not know, will admit that language is a necessary part of our human experience. Language develops and changes as human experience develops and changes. Language and experience are connected. God is revealed in human experience and we describe that experience in words and images. We Presbyterians take words very seriously. We trust them to share our experience of the mystery that is God. We are a people of the Word, revealed in the person Jesus, recorded in the Bible, interpreted in sermon and sacrament.

We preachers use words as an artist uses his paints or a doctor her medicines. We intend them to have a positive effect on the body and spirit of our hearers. One wonders what effect we have when we use exclusively male language about God. What effect does exclusively male language about God have on our understanding of humanity being created in the image of God? Throughout the history of the church there have been theologians who have claimed that women lack the image of God. Do we believe that? Do we suggest it by our language about God? Does exclusively male language about God suggest to anyone that only males are created in God's image? Does it suggest that female persons are derivative creations, a secondary form of humanity? Alternatively, will we spiritualize the image of God? Will we separate the soul from the body and claim it is the soul alone that is created in God's image? How then will we relate such a dualistic concept of humanity to a nondocetic doctrine of the incarnation of God?

Moreover, we need to ask whether a God who is referred to in exclusively male language is to be thought of as having exclusively masculine characteristics? Which

culture's definition of masculine is to be employed? And what is to be thought about gentleness, patience, kindness, goodness: fruits of the Spirit often assigned in our culture to the feminine. Do not the fruits of the Spirit also in some way describe that very Spirit? And when we say "a man can also be gentle" are we not acknowledging that gentleness is uncharacteristic of men in our culture? Thus one exciting possibility latent in expansion of our language about God is a corresponding expansion of our understanding of ourselves as human beings, whether male or female.

Our language about God has never limited God. Our language certainly limits us and sets boundaries for our experience of God. To refer to God continually as Father in a neighborhood where fathers are the ones who are permanently absent, for whatever reasons, conveys little of God's abiding love. To refer to God repeatedly as Lord and King in a nation whose very existence begins in the repudiation of lords and kings creates, at best, the need for further explanation. Referring to God entirely in masculine words and images in a world that is at least fifty percent women may have something to do with men's experience of sin as pride and women's experience of sin as self-abnegation.

The hermeneutical challenge is not to be rid of masculine images and words for expressing our experience of God. That would be to disconnect ourselves from the rich heritage of the saints who have gone before. The challenge is to expand our language, to stretch our language in ways that more accurately share our total experience of God's revelation. A recent book title gives us a hint: My Mother who Fathered Me. Why not begin a prayer by addressing God as Our Father who gives us birth or Our Mother who protects us? Is that mixing metaphors? Or is it legitimizing life-giving characteristics for men and life-protecting characteristics for women? And even more, is not such language more faithful to the fullness of God who is revealed to us in Scriptures as both life-giving and life-protecting?

Stretching our language about God to include both male and female names, both feminine and masculine images and characteristics, recognizes that God is beyond any human divisions or dualities. Inclusive language about God accepts with humility the limitations of any language in referring to God. Inclusive language about God transcends the male idol we often have put in God's place.