

My Reflection on “God the Father”

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Although no Christian says God is a man, to talk about God in male terms has undoubtedly been the assumed norm since the beginning of Christianity. Our Bible, liturgy and traditional hymns all describe God in the masculine term. The church recites the Lord’s Prayer every week and it begins with “Our Father who art in heaven.” One might ask, “If Jesus addresses God as father, who am I to question Jesus’ wisdom?” Given society-at-large has been using the male-term such as “mankind” for centuries when it comes to describe the whole human family, we are numbed to see the potential problems this designation brings. For me to even bother to raise the issue, some would blame me for being unfaithful to the biblical authority.

In our Tuesday morning Bible study, we have just finished studying the book, *Opening the Bible* by Robert Kysar. Early in the book Kysar reminds us that the Bible is a product of cultures, despite the church also claiming the Bible teaches eternal truth. In the Bible, one finds diversity in cultural settings, customs, and languages. The challenge for us who read the Bible in the 21st century is to refrain from making mindless equivalences between the text and our context. We need to be extra sensitive to the cultural assumptions that are hidden in the message. Without that sensitivity, we run the risk of granting finite teachings of a time universal status. Often the Bible contains accepted values we contemporary Christians find offensive, such as slavery, multiple wives/concubines for men, and the Bible’s strange silence on prostitution. The Bible is also a product of patriarchal cultures. The domination of men was the acceptable social norm of the times, from which the biblical message was written. In that world, women were considered properties of men. Women, along with children and slaves, had no status, no power and no rights but depended on men. Ancient biblical writers might be critical about idolatry or unethical livings, but they were numb concerning the unchallenged cultural practices in which they were brought up. Of course, these biblical writers were all men and they were beneficiaries of patriarchal cultures. Although sincerely we want to honour God’s word, we have to be careful not to equate taking the face value of any biblical text as faithfulness to the gospel – they are not the same. I am content that the talk of God as father and in male pronounce is a time-bound culture, thus, it should never be revered as a divine design.

Language matters because it carries social power. There is nothing in life that surpasses politics. “God the Father” is a political statement. A few will disagree with me when I say that our society has been organized in a way that favours men. For a long time, women could not vote, were not allowed to attend schools and universities, and were not encouraged to work. Many high paying professions such as medical doctors, engineers, lawyers, university professors and low paying jobs but highly esteemed occupations such as clergy were considered for men only. We have come a long way to fight inequality between the two sexes. The religious language that portrays God as a man lends divine support to this social injustice. Even today, the idea of women leadership continues to receive bad press. Superficially, our society chants equality; yet, many still think women should follow men’s leadership. With the help of the popularized movies such as *Pretty Woman*, *Maid in Manhattan*, or even *Harry Potter*, the general public is domesticating an abusive social myth that says women need to be “rescued” by powerful men. This social myth has deep religious roots.

The usage of male language to describe the divine has negative psychological implications. It potentially exerts unrealistic expectations and tragic consequences on children. Psychologists have informed us that children of younger ages cannot think in abstract terms. That is why Sunday school teachers and pastors when they teach younger children should not say, “Open your hearts to Jesus.” Younger children

will have a hard time understanding us because they think literally. Instead, to grasp the concept of God, children need “pet-gods” - usually their favorite toys and/or their parents. It is common among young children to think of their parents as exemplars of God. The term “God the Father” becomes a handy social association for children to grasp the idea of God. That is where the problem lies: If the child’s earthly father is a caring, loving and compassionate man, then the association is a good one. If the child’s father functions his parental role like a harsh judge who is rule-oriented, demanding, and not showing emotion and compassion in front of children, or making it worse, the father abuses the child physically, emotionally, verbally and/or sexually, then the association is a terrible one. Children and teenagers who have negative experiences with their earthly fathers cannot stand the male image of God when they grow up - it traumatizes them. It is unfortunate that opinions about earthly fathers become opinions about God the Creator.

Today’s men are changing. But the attributes of nurture, care, relational and compassion are still easily spotted in most women than men. (I know I have generalized it.) Sometimes, this unwarranted God-male association exerts negative influence to the church. It is rather easy to imagine God as a male-ruler (usually a European male) sitting up high, demanding obedience than to see a God who is full of compassion, love, care, and accepts us unconditionally. The common yet faulty idea is that God welcomes us into God’s family because we conform to God’s rule. It is a projection of the practices of human parents. Such an idea nullifies the need of gospel. Social psychologists inform us that the stricter the parental rules, the more likely their children fantasize sadistic, masochistic and authoritarian lifestyles when they reach adulthood. If children got repeatedly spanked by their parents, then the liturgical chant, “Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy,” could have deviated psychological meaning to them. If we entertain the idea that fatherhood and motherhood compliments each other in parenting, the exclusive usage of the term “father” and ignore the attributes of “mother” when it comes to describing God is to impair balanced Christian living.

Recently, some Christians challenged the accepted notion of God the Father and suggested alternative term such as “God the Mother.” That is a necessary political move to heighten the awareness of the issue. The church should welcome it because after all, this is just human language to describe the indescribable. Yet, my inclination is to use **neutral** language in describing God because God is neither a man nor a woman. Classical Christian teaching always insists that God is a spirit and God is beyond human comprehension. Although God can be described using human terms such as father, mother, shepherd, and so on, human language is inadequate to name God fully. Instead of saying, “This is His church and we come to worship Him,” I say, “This is God’s church and we come to worship God.” In terms of the Lord’s Prayer, we can say, “Living God who art in heaven.” Unless we are talking about Jesus, try to use words such as “God” and “God’s” whenever possible. This inclusive language allows the church to create a favourable atmosphere for both sexes to exercise their God given gifts without prejudice. It will take some time for us to get used to it since it does not come naturally due to education in the past. May be we should start practicing it today.

The wordings in the Lord’s Prayer, the Creeds or the lyrics of our favourite hymns might never change. But we can change the way we think, talk and write. Next time you recite the Lord’s Prayer, at least you are aware of the alternatives. This is the very reason why I support any Sunday school curriculum, liturgy and/or adult education learning materials that use inclusive language.