

## **Is God Male?**

By

Kathleen Hardcastle

October 18, 2009

The question about God and gender seems rather obvious to most people. Jesus taught us to pray “Our Father who is in heaven . . .” Is there any room to doubt God’s male gender? It sounds blasphemous to pray “Our Mother who is in heaven. . .” One of the first memory verses repeated by new Christians is John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that HE gave HIS only begotten Son.” Since Jesus is God and man, doesn’t it logically follow that God must be male? If God isn’t male, what are the options?

Should the Bible be rewritten to use gender inclusive language such as calling God “Her” or “She?” Perhaps it would be more sensitive to sometimes imply that God could be feminine. In the current popular book, *The Shack*, William Young gives an updated view of the Trinity by describing God as an African-American woman.<sup>1</sup> Referring to God by using two marginalized minorities – women and African-

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Young, *The Shack* (Newbury Park, CA: Windblown Media, 2007).

Americans – was shocking to most people who read the story. Does it really make a difference whether God is masculine or feminine? The answer needs to be found in scripture.

Gender is a core essence for human beings. Everyone comes into the world either male or female and it is impossible to remove oneself from the perspective of one's gender. However, gender is based in the biological and not in the spiritual. By projecting gender onto the image of God, man is in essence creating God into the image of man and not the other way around. In Genesis 1:27, the creation of Adam and Eve is described. "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."<sup>2</sup> The scripture clearly indicates in this passage that both male and female were made in the image of God. Does this mean that God is both male and female? No. Gender is biological. We know that God is a spirit and He does not exist in either maleness or femaleness. "There are no suggestions in Scripture that sexuality is part of the image of God in humanity; rather it is a part of the created order that is shared with many of God's other creatures."<sup>3</sup> The Jewish people did not have a view of God that was masculine. "Deuteronomy 6:4 describes God as one, complete, whole. He is another order in contrast to the pagan gods and idols of other peoples. He is spirit, neither male nor female, but having both feminine and masculine characteristics."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>All scripture quotations unless otherwise noted are from the New International Version.

<sup>3</sup>Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, eds. (*Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementary without Hierarchy*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 290.

<sup>4</sup>Deborah M. Gill and Barbara L. Cavaness. (*God's Women – Then and Now*. Springfield, MO: Grace & Truth, 2004), 45.

Language is inherently flawed when trying to describe God. In English, while the plural pronoun “they” is gender-neutral, there is no singular neutral pronoun that can be used except the impersonal “it.” In order to make the Bible cohesive, the translators have consistently used the masculine pronouns, “he” and “him” when referring to God. While many Christians have not given it much thought, the use of masculine pronouns to describe God overshadows any attempt to be either gender inclusive or gender neutral when describing God.

The argument has been made that the use of “he” is actually the generic pronoun that can be used to describe either a male or a female. For instance, the statement that “all men are created equal” really means all humans are created equal. The problem with this interpretation is that it is selective and only means gender neutral when those in authority wish it to be gender neutral. It actually means male when they choose to maintain the power balance. Gender neutral language is becoming more and more popular in daily culture. Names or titles are changing such as flight attendant instead of stewardess, or chairperson instead of chairman. However, the search for a gender neutral pronoun remains.

In her book, *Women and the Word*, Sandra Schneiders identifies four types of language used in the Bible to describe God: literal designations, names for God, personifications of God and metaphors for God.<sup>5</sup> Although God is a spirit and without gender, writers have used both male and female imagery and grammar to describe Him.

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<sup>5</sup>Sandra Schneiders. *Women and the Word* (Notre Dame, IN: Paulist Press, 1986), 20.

Literal language about God is a statement that is meant to be taken at face value. “God was the liberator who brought the Hebrews out of Egypt, the covenant-maker who bound Israel and its God together at Sinai and the restorer who brought the chastened people back from exile.”<sup>6</sup> These descriptions of God are literal and genderless.

Moses asked God for His name and God replied, “I am who I am.” (Exod. 3:14) This self description or name of God has no gender. God also said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers — the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob — has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation (v. 3:15). This description does not give any suggestion of gender. Although by noting only male ancestors, it reminds the reader that Moses was a part of a patriarchal society, the name does not necessarily follow that God is male. In Genesis 16:13, Hagar names God, “You are the God who sees me.” Again, this name of God has no gender attached.

Two personifications of God are Wisdom and Shekinah, a rabbinic word meaning “to dwell.”<sup>7</sup> Shekinah could be described as the presence of God such as the pillar of cloud by day and the column of fire at night (Exod. 13:21) or the cloud of glory over the tabernacle (v. 40:34-38). According to Schneiders, the personifications of Wisdom and Shekinah were always presented as feminine. This does not mean that God is female. It does demonstrate that the Bible is not singular in the use of masculine names, descriptions or inferences of God. Bible translations and church

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 23.

leadership have interpreted the Bible based on their own biases and perceptions of God's character. In a patriarchal society, it is not surprising that God was described in masculine terms and not in feminine.

The fourth type of language that is used in the Bible to describe God is metaphorical. It is difficult to understand God by using language since God cannot be defined by words alone. Metaphors are an attempt to create word pictures that describe God by using imagery and objects that can be understood. A metaphor says "God is like this" or "God is like that." When Samuel said that God is his rock, his shield and the horn of his salvation, he did not mean that God was literally those things (2 Sam. 22:3). There are many examples of metaphoric language describing God.

In Deuteronomy 32:18, God is both the father and the mother who gives birth: "You deserted the Rock, who fathered you; you forgot the God who gave you birth." In Job, the writer talks about God both mothering and fathering: "Does the rain have a father? Who fathers the drops of dew? From whose womb comes the ice? Who gives birth to the frost from the heavens (Job 38:28-29)?"

God is also described as a woman in labor and giving birth. He is seen as being in pain and crying out, gasping for breath. "For a long time I have kept silent, I have been quiet and held myself back. But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant" (Isa. 42:14). Again the feminine imagery is found in Isaiah 49:15, "Can a woman forget her nursing child, And not have compassion on the son of her womb? Surely they may forget, Yet I will not forget you (NKJV). God is a comforting mother,

“For thus says the Lord: . . . As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you (vv. 66:12-13).

Isaiah describes God as both mother and father in this hymn of praise: “Look down from heaven and see, from your holy and glorious habitation. Where are your zeal and your might? The trembling of your womb and your womb-tenderness? They are withheld from me. For . . . you are our father” (Isa. 63:15-16, literal translation).<sup>8</sup>

With these feminine images of God, it is clear that the common belief that God is male is not accurate. The metaphoric language describing God is more than just male or female, however. Hosea describes God as an enraged mother bear. “When I fed them, they were satisfied; when they were satisfied, they became proud; then they forgot me. So I will come upon them like a lion, like a leopard I will lurk by the path. Like a bear robbed of her cubs, I will attack them and rip them open. Like a lion I will devour them; a wild animal will tear them apart” (Hosea 13:6-8).

There are many more metaphors used in scripture. Some of the metaphors are male in nature, some female, some inanimate objects such as a rock or a shield or a fortress, and some are animals such as a hen or an eagle or a lion. With these examples, it is clear that scripture is not identifying a gender related to God.

Since Jesus was a man and Jesus was God, Christians have assumed this indicates that God is male. Jesus was born in the body of a male human. He was completely God and he was completely a man. As stated earlier, this argument presupposes the equality of gender with the biology of sex. The biology or physiology

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<sup>8</sup> Smith, 72.

of Jesus was male. If Jesus was to be born human, it is obvious that he would embody the biology of male or female. Gender is part of being human. It was because he was a man that his choice of lifestyle stood out as a contradiction of the current definition of masculinity and of humanity as defined by the dominant male culture. By Jesus' actions such as talking to the Samaritan woman at the well, he was able to challenge both the male and the female stereotypes of the day. He challenged men to drop their assumption of superiority and he challenged women to view themselves as valuable and worthy. The woman taken in adultery is another example of Jesus' upsetting the status quo. Had he been a woman, he would not have been given the opportunity to demonstrate God's equal love for both the male and the female. His goal was to point mankind back to the Garden of Eden where God's original plan for unity, intimacy and equality were subverted. Jesus is most often referred to in the Bible with the Greek word for "human being" (*anthropos*). "Thus the emphasis of the Incarnation is not Christ's maleness, but His humanness. Maleness is not a factor in the image of God. All human beings – both male and female – are equal in His image."<sup>9</sup>

Does it really make a difference whether God is referred to as male or female? In his book, *Is it Okay to Call God "Mother"*, Paul Smith writes that "Centuries of assault on the nurturing maternal, and compassionate images of God have resulted in the virtual abortion of the feminine in much of the church today. This dismemberment and discarding of the feminine leadership and language is the most pressing theological and social agenda within the American church today. The

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<sup>9</sup> Deborah Gill and Barvara Cavaness, 37.

abortion of the feminine from our language about God is the foundation of the war against women in the church.”<sup>10</sup> Women have been marginalized in most world cultures including the Christian world. Language and the perception of God have been used to maintain the power and authority of men.

In the introduction to Dorothy Sayer’s article titled “Are Women Human?” Mary McDermott Shideler wrote, “Male and female are biological categories. Masculine and feminine are cultural categories. Both are impersonal classifications with real but limited usefulness. We cannot live or think effectively without classifying our experiences, but always we must ask whether the categories we are using are adequate for the problem we are considering.”<sup>11</sup>

Yes, language and words matter. Sayers writes:

The first thing that strikes the careless observer is that women are unlike men. They are “the opposite sex” – (though why “opposite” I do not know; what is the “neighbouring sex”?) But the fundamental thing is that women are more like men than anything else in the world. They are human beings. *Vir* is male and *Femina* is female: but *Homo* is male and female.

This is the equality claimed and the fact that is persistently evaded and denied. No matter what arguments are used, the discussion is vitiated from the start, because Man is always dealt with as both *Homo* and *Vir*, but Woman only as *Femina*.<sup>12</sup>

According to Sandra Schneiders, “As women have become aware of their inferior status and actual oppression in family, society, and church, they have also become aware that the gender of God, God’s presumed masculinity, has functioned as the ultimate religious legitimation of the unjust social structures which victimize

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<sup>10</sup> Paul Smith, *Is It Okay to Call God “Mother”: Considering the Feminine Face of God* (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson Publishers, Ind., 1993), 147.

<sup>11</sup>Dorothy L. Sayers. *Are Women Humans?* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1971), 11.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 53-54.

women.”<sup>13</sup> By studying the true, Biblical nature of God, the church can begin the journey back toward God’s original intent in the Garden of Eden.

In conclusion, it is not wrong to use masculine or feminine pronouns when referring to God. The problem arises when doctrine or theology is developed based on those pronouns or assumptions rather than the true meaning of scripture. Paul Smith’s book asks the question, “Is it Okay to call God ‘Mother?’”<sup>14</sup> The answer is, yes! The importance is the attitude of the heart and not the pronoun.

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<sup>13</sup>Schneiders, 5.

<sup>14</sup>Smith, 3.

## Bibliography

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