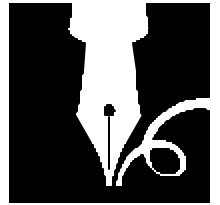


Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

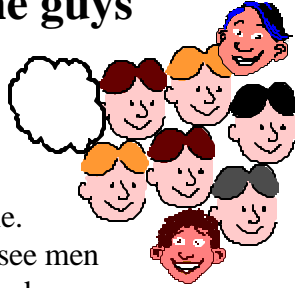
NUMBER 39 - JANUARY 1996



BY BARBARA WENDLAND 505 CHEROKEE DRIVE TEMPLE, TX 76504 817-773-2625 bcwendland@aol.com

God isn't one of the guys

God is neither male nor female. By our constant use of masculine titles and pronouns to refer to God, however, we make God seem male.



Doing this lets us mistakenly see men as members of God's group and women as members of a much less important group. It makes God seem like just one of the good old boys.

To avoid this impression, some Christians suggest using only impersonal titles like "creator" for God, but most Christians feel that we need personal words to show God's caring nature. This usually requires using masculine or feminine words.

Men have set the standards



Using only masculine words for God may have begun because in the cultures in which the Bible was written and Christianity was born, males were considered much more important than females. Even in our culture, men have generally been considered more important than women. Besides, men have mostly done the labeling and set the standards. But making God seem male has harmed both men and women.

It has given some men the false belief that they have unlimited God-given authority and are justified in using it to overpower women. Seeing God as male has also made us see women as people who belong only in the background, doing what keeps men comfortable and free for the world's really important jobs.



Closeness to a male God can scare men

Making God seem male also can discourage men from getting close to God. Because of our society's uneasiness about intimacy between men, for a

(continued on page 2)

Men worshipping a male god?

We say we believe that God is neither male nor female and that women are as valuable as men, but many words that we use in our worship contradict that claim.



They make our worship seem like a gathering for men only, to worship a member of their group.

Hymns and creeds give the message

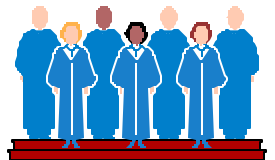
Consider the words of some familiar hymns. Look at "To God be the glory, great things he hath done! So loved he the world that he gave us his Son ... Praise the Lord, let the earth hear his voice ... great things he hath done!" Those words clearly picture God as male.



Look at the traditional Doxology—"praise him all creatures ...," "praise him above ...," "praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost." Look at the Apostles' Creed. Look at the Gloria Patri and the other parts of our liturgy that repeatedly say "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." They make God seem to be male, and they stress the maleness of Jesus instead of the humanness that's what matters.

Anthems and scriptures give the message

Look at the exclusively male words of many scriptures and of anthems based on them. Here's part of an anthem I heard recently. "Thou hast made man a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with honor and with glory. ... Thou hast put all things under his feet ..." This part was sung only by the men in the choir, making the words seem like pompous self-congratulation instead of praise to God. During it the women repeatedly sang "Alleluia, Alleluia!" in hushed, awed voices, adding to the uncertainty about who was being praised.



God is nudging us to change

Language like this falsely pictures God as a member of the male group, making it look much more important than the female one. This incorrectly says that women are mere servants of men or, worse, that women don't exist or that they're not important enough to mention.

It's no wonder that many perceptive Christians are changing to words that more accurately reflect what we claim to believe. If this is a God-inspired change, as I believe it is, we all need to be promoting it.

(God isn't one of the guys, continued from page 1)

man to get intimate with God can easily seem too threatening to risk, if God seems to be male.

These harmful effects are especially unfortunate because God is actually not male. The Bible tells us that in addition to characteristics we have traditionally considered masculine, God also has characteristics we consider feminine. Words for God's spirit, God's presence, and God's wisdom are feminine in the original languages of the Bible. Also, several scriptures describe God in terms of female biological features and feminine roles and traits. In our male-oriented cultures, however, relatively few feminine pictures of God have survived, and we've ignored those that have.



God is like a searching woman

One of them shows God as a woman looking for a lost coin. That picture is between those that picture God as a shepherd looking for a lost sheep and as a father welcoming a lost son. Yet we routinely call God shepherd and father but not a searching woman.

“What woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so ... , there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”
—Luke 15:8-10

God is like a mother



Many scriptures describe God as giving birth or nursing. These roles are possible only for a mother, yet some Christians say we shouldn't call

God “mother.” Surprisingly, even those who most often use the phrase “born again” (from John 3:3, in which God must be the one giving birth) reject referring to God as mother because “mother”

I will cry out like a woman in labor ...
—Isaiah 42:14

“... No one can see the kingdom of God without being born anew from above.”
—John 3:3

Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.
—Isaiah 49:15



is only a metaphor. But “Father” is a metaphor, too. So is “rock,” which Christians have called God for centuries. That excuse isn't convincing.

Do we say “Father” because Jesus did?

Some Christians say we must call God only “Father” because that's what Jesus did. The Christians who make this claim, however, apply it only where they choose to. Jesus evidently wore a robe and sandals, but I don't see anyone claiming that his current followers should. Jesus spoke Aramaic, but we don't feel any need to. Those behaviors, like his maleness



and his other physical features, weren't what made Jesus the Christ. They aren't what we need to imitate. They were merely part of living in first-century Palestine.

To show how God was like a good parent, Jesus had to say either “mother” or “father,” and in his culture only “father” was likely to be convincing, because women were nobodies. They were seen as men's property. They had identity only through their fathers and husbands. It's no wonder, therefore, that Jesus used only “Father,” but we don't have that reason for doing it. Besides, God didn't have the father role in our conception as we believe God did for Jesus. ❖



Being male wasn't what was important about Jesus

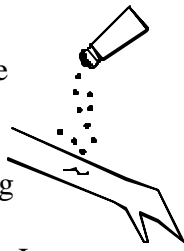
No thinking person denies that Jesus was male. Few Christians claim that Jesus' maleness keeps him from being able to represent God for women or to be the savior for women. Many responsible Christians are pointing out, however, that when we emphasize the maleness of Jesus rather than the humanness of Jesus we're missing the point and misleading people. We also harm both women and men by making men seem more God-like than women. It's cruel as well as false.



It hurts, and it's not necessary

When I go to church and hear Jesus spoken of as “the Son,” “the Lord,” and “the King,” over and

over and over, or when I read belief statements that are saturated with those masculine words, it feels like having salt poured into a wound. It hurts. It feels as if the speaker or writer is trying to force me to think that because I'm female I have nothing in common with Jesus.



Besides, this heavy usage of masculine names is unnecessary. The fact that those names for Jesus are traditional doesn't mean we must limit ourselves to them. It certainly doesn't mean we must bombard people with them constantly in our worship or our creeds. We can use a variety of words to describe the Christ and still be correct.

Important reminders



Several years ago a sculpture caused a furor among traditionalist Christians because it showed a crucified female body in the way we usually portray the crucified Jesus. Equally upsetting to traditionalists was some black theologians' use of the phrase "black Messiah."

It seems to me that criticizing portrayals like these shows misunderstanding about Jesus. It shows confusion about the difference between the earthly Jesus and his role as the eternal Christ, between Jesus' humanity and his divinity.

**"Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... !
How often have I desired to
gather your children to-
gether as a hen gathers her
brood under her wings ... !"**
—Matthew 23:37

Showing the Christ as female or black isn't denying the facts about Jesus. Such portrayals are merely ways of re-

minding us that neither maleness nor any other biological, ethnic, or cultural feature was what made Jesus the Christ. Scripture even shows this. It shows Jesus describing himself in female terms.

The body of Christ isn't a male body

Jesus, who uniquely embodied the Christ, happened to be male, but we say we believe that the church, which includes both women and men, is now the body of Christ. If we were sure of that, I don't think we'd keep using only masculine words for God, Christ, or groups that include both sexes.

Can "sophia" refer to God?

Heated controversy has arisen in churches recently because in an effort to find non-masculine ways of speaking to and about God, some Christians are using the word "sophia." It is a feminine Greek word meaning "wisdom." In the original Greek of the New Testament, it refers to Christ, God's wisdom.

We proclaim Christ crucified ... Christ the power of God and the wisdom [in Greek, "sophia"] of God.
—1 Cor. 1:23-24

In the beginning was the Word [in Greek, "logos"], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
—John 1:1

Many Christians see "sophia" as parallel to the masculine Greek word "logos," which means "word" and also appears in the New Testament. Both "logos" and "word" have been used often by Christians to refer to Christ, but apparently this usage arose later than the usage of "sophia."

A feminine word for "wisdom" is used in the Old Testament, too. In the book of Proverbs and elsewhere, this Hebrew word portrays God's wisdom as a woman.

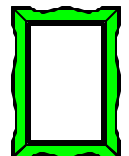
Wisdom cries out in the street ... "Give heed to my reproof ... I have called and ... have stretched out my hand and no one heeded ..."
—Proverbs 1:20-24

For a fuller explanation of this subject, I suggest the book *In Search of the Christ-Sophia* (Twenty-Third Publications, 1995), by Dr. Jann Aldredge Clanton, a Southern Baptist clergywoman who has a solid academic background but writes in a non-academic style.



Some Christians fear that "sophia" is being used to mean some sort of goddess rather than an aspect of God. These Christians say that addressing "sophia" is worshipping a pagan deity, but I believe these critics are missing the point and overreacting. Some recent gatherings in which "sophia" was used in worship have included practices that seem inappropriate to me, but I don't believe our churches should forbid such gatherings. After all, many traditional Christian worship services also include practices that seem inappropriate to some Christians. In our churches we need to discuss what is appropriate for Christian worship, but we shouldn't expect all members to worship in the same way. When we do, we make seeing God harder for some people.

We often forget that our favorite pictures of God are just pictures. We worship them instead of the God that they are meant to picture. That's idolatry. And we attack the Christians who happen to see God best through pictures that differ from our favorites or from the best-known parts of our tradition. Attacks like that are unkind. And neither idolatry nor unkindness is what God wants from us.



We use all sorts of smoke screens to hide the unreasonableness of what we're doing. It's time to clear away the smoke and make our words match what we say we believe.



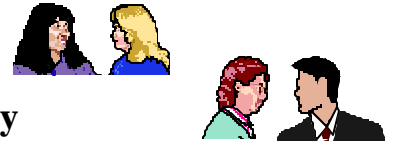
Accomplishing that won't be easy, because the ideal words don't even exist in English. And having to say "her or his" takes more time, thought, and space than just saying "his." So does saying "God" and "God's" over and over to avoid "him" and "his." Even "God" is a masculine word, but "Goddess" conveys the wrong message to many people. There's

no perfect solution. Whatever changes we make will be clumsy and inconvenient at best. But which is worse, being clumsy and inconvenient, or continuing to put women down and to give a false picture of God? To me, the answer to that question seems obvious. ❖

Barbara

Next month . . .

**Seeking God's will
about homosexuality**

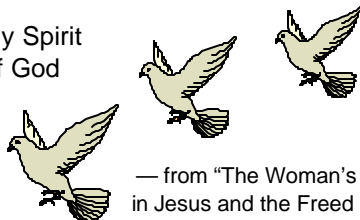


I believe in God
who created woman and man in God's own image
who created the world
and gave both sexes
the care of the earth. ...



I believe in Jesus
who spoke of himself as a mother hen
who would gather her chicks
under her wings. ...

I believe in the Holy Spirit
the woman spirit of God
who like a hen
created us
and gave us birth
and covers us
with her wings.



— from "The Woman's Creed,"
in *Jesus and the Freed Woman*,
by Rachel Conrad Wahlberg