

# Paper F1

## Language, gender and God

### Faith and Order Committee

#### Basic information

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<b>Action required</b>	Groupwork.
<b>Draft resolution(s)</b>	<b>None.</b>

#### Summary of content

<b>Subject and aim(s)</b>	To think afresh about how we speak of God, and especially about gendered language for God.
<b>Main points</b>	A God beyond gender. The limits and potential of language. Ecumenical concerns. A wide horizon.
<b>Previous relevant documents</b>	General Assembly papers 1984, 1997 and 2014, noted below.
<b>Consultation has taken place with...</b>	Mission Council Advisory Group.

#### Summary of impact

<b>Financial</b>	Nil.
<b>External (e.g. ecumenical)</b>	A chance to reflect on our particular contribution to the life, testimony and worship of the whole Church.

1. Recent years have seen a marked increase in the Church's use of gender sensitive language. For instance, most recent translations of the bible employ expressions such as 'brothers and sisters' or 'sons and daughters' where before the text would have simply spoken of 'brothers' or 'sons'. There is now a general recognition that one-time generic words like 'men' can no longer be taken to mean both men and woman without causing offence.
2. The motivation for the widespread use of gender sensitive language both in society and in the church has to do in part with a commitment to affirm the status and defend the rights of women in today's world. What appears to be merely a linguistic issue is held by advocates of gender equality to be a matter of justice. One of their claims is that patriarchal societies unconsciously use the language of male dominance to perpetuate unjust social structures. If we are to reform those structures, so the argument goes, we need to reform our language.

3. The logic of this movement for language reform leads us inevitably to ask questions about the language we use of God. In particular, how are we as Christians to employ gender sensitive language in our affirmations of the Trinity, of the one God who has historically been worshipped in the Church as Father, Son and Holy Spirit? This question raises a number of important issues.

## A. Does God have a gender?

4. In the Jewish and Christian scriptures and their worshipping traditions male pronouns are consistently employed with reference to God. It is important, however, to recognise that these same scriptures also affirm God to be spirit or immaterial in being. This means that they do not recognise in God any physical attributes which we would normally associate with gender. In the divine being there are no X or Y chromosomes, no testosterone levels that might be measured, no long grey beard. It is, however, argued that it is the divine character or attributes of God that makes it appropriate for us to speak of (him) as male. God is, for instance, recognised to be all-powerful and this dominant or leadership role is more naturally associated, it is held, with the male sex. But there is a flaw in such an argument. A number of characteristics that we ascribe to God such as love and compassion are clearly not the sole preserve of men. It is interesting that in the creation story Eve is spoken of as a helper (*ezer*) for Adam. Some view this as a principal role of women in society. But in the Old Testament the word *ezer* is predominantly used with reference to God (16 times). 'My father's God was my *helper*; he saved me from the sword of Pharaoh' (Ex18:4). Being our helper is in the bible a notable characteristic of God.
5. It is the shared faith of Christians that we, as humans, have been created as image bearers of God.

So God created mankind in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them. (Gen1:27)

It is significant that we carry the reflection of the divine character together, as men and women. There is nothing that is determinatively masculine about the being, character or attributes of God.

## B. Personal pronouns and God

6. Is it appropriate to use personal pronouns like 'he' or 'she' with reference to God? Some might argue that God is so absolutely different from us as humans that to speak of God in personal terms is as meaningless as to refer to light or music or love as 'he' or 'she'.
7. This is a philosophically important question. It raises the question of what words creatures can use of their creator when all the language we have at our disposal is shaped by our creaturely experience. If we do not use personal pronouns for light or music or love why, it is asked, should we use them of God? We need to

take a step back. Even a term like 'love' refers to a distinctively human experience. Can 'love' be appropriately applied to God?

8. Our response as Christians is that we believe humans are created in the divine image, that in some amazing way we reflect the character of God. It is not that we have constructed a loving God but rather that a God of infinite love has created us. Similarly it can be argued that an intensely personal God has made me to be a person. In short, personhood, like love, comes before humanity. The God revealed in the Scriptures seeks our total love in response to the divine love that first found us.

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. (Deut6:4,5)*

The fountainhead of all our moral duties lies in our calling into a personal relation with a personal God. Although we might struggle to develop the appropriate personal pronouns to use of God, it is important that we do not undermine the divine personhood by the use of impersonal language. God is not an 'it'.

## C. The place of metaphor

9. It was suggested above that human language of God can never move beyond our creaturely experience. It will consequently always be inadequate in speaking of a creator who is totally other than creation. But just as a person who is blind might use a white stick to engage with and come to know in part a world that lies beyond his or her sight, so language can be a tool by which we encounter and so understand in some measure a reality that lies beyond our immediate sensory experience.
10. One way we do this is through metaphor. For instance a 'virus' can be defined as a small infectious agent that replicates only inside the living cells of an organism. To speak of a computer having a virus is to use the word 'virus' as a metaphor. It offers a way of understanding how the complex and invisible codes of binary data controlling the computer are no longer functioning as originally intended because a 'malignant' code has been surreptitiously introduced into the system. Through its flexibility a metaphor can creatively extend our understanding of a world that lies beyond our present experience.
11. Consider the expression 'The Lord is my shepherd'. The word 'shepherd' is here being used as a metaphor. Only sheep have shepherds. Yet Psalm 23 has unrivalled poetic power in portraying the confidence a believer might have in the care of a loving God. Shepherding is a rural occupation of the inhabitants of a minor planet of an insignificant star in one of countless galaxies. And yet this humble metaphor has the potency to help us understand a central characteristic of the one who created all that is seen and unseen.
12. To speak of God as our father is also to speak metaphorically. The word 'father' refers primarily to a particular human who played a specific role in our conception. But the word 'father' when used as a metaphor for God can open our minds to understand something of divine, infinite, freely given love. Metaphors are of course flexible. To speak of God as father is not to say that God is male any more

than to refer to God as the 'rock of my salvation' indicates that the divine nature is some sort of stone.

13. Certain metaphors are not helpful to some people. After gaining independence from Britain many republican-minded Americans struggled with the concept of kingship as a characteristic of God. Their low view of English kings made them deeply suspicious of any notion of monarchy. For similar reasons there will be those for whom fatherhood has been so negative an experience or conjures up such ugly images that to speak of God as father is for them an unhelpful metaphor as they seek to engage meaningfully with the reality of God.

### **D. Male gods and patriarchal societies**

14. To what extent does our language regarding gender shape our social structures? In particular how does a society's interpretation of the gender of its god or gods give support and legitimacy to its patriarchal institutions?
15. These are important questions that are worthy of serious study. It should be noted, however, that ancient Greek, Roman and Middle Eastern societies had many female deities. Athena, the Greek goddess of war, was the guardian of Athens. Isis was a leading goddess among the Egyptians. Ishtar, the Sumerian and Babylonian goddess, symbolised war and conflict. Anat was the virgin goddess of war among the Canaanites. Diana was the hunter goddess of the Romans. Such a list somewhat undermines the widely-held theory that patriarchal communities inevitably view their gods as male as a way of maintaining their own dominant status. It is interesting that many of the 'warrior' gods of these ancient societies were female.
16. What part has a Christian understanding of God as Father played in the subjection of women within Christendom? This is not easy to answer and we need to remain open to the findings of historical and social research. It is important, however, for us to take particular care before making bold assertions on this matter. We should remember that many believers have found expressions of the fatherhood of God expressed in passages such as the Lord's Prayer to be an integral feature of their experience of God.

### **E. Talking of the Trinity**

17. Discussions and controversies in the Early Church led to some ways of speaking about God that have become very familiar to us. Arian contemporaries argued that Jesus was acknowledged to be the divine Son through his life of obedience: his God-ness came through what he did. Whereas Athanasius and others who came to be considered 'orthodox' held that Christ's deity flowed from his being: his God-ness was inherent in who he was. So it is that the early creeds came to affirm that Christ was of one being or substance with the Father. Similarly, the Church's affirmation of God as Trinity emphasised that the three persons shared in or had in common the one being of God.
18. The value for the Early Church of using the language of Father and Son was that it offered a conceptual account of how these two persons participated in the same

being and so shared equally in divine honour. The Son was begotten of the Father, the Spirit (in the Western Church) proceeded from the Father and the Son. The Church might today find new, gender sensitive language to delineate the divine persons but it would be faithful to the theological tradition only if it was able to indicate that they were of the same being. For instance, to speak of the triune persons as Creator, Saviour and Life Giver adequately identifies the persons by their activity, but does not offer any help in understanding how they relate to one another as one being.

19. In the twentieth century the German theologian Karl Barth formulated an imaginative new expression of the Trinity in his doctrine of the Word of God. He spoke of the Triune God in terms of Revealer, Revelation and Revealedness, holding the persons together around the concept of Jesus as the revealing Word of God. However when expounding the doctrine of reconciliation in the fourth volume of his monumental *Church Dogmatics* Barth reverted back to the traditional language of Father, Son and Spirit. His early Trinitarian formulations appeared not to have had enough 'personal' depth to describe adequately the saving action of the one loving God.
20. The United Reformed Church has given serious attention to the development of gender sensitive language in its Trinitarian formulations. See *the Manual*, Section 18, the Basis of Union:

At the General Assembly of 1997 the United Reformed Church adopted the following alternative version of the statement in paragraph 17 to be available alongside the 1972 statement:

1. We believe in the one and only God, Eternal Trinity, from whom, through whom and for whom all created things exist. God alone we worship; in God we put our trust.
2. We worship God, source and sustainer of creation, whom Jesus called Father, whose sons and daughters we are.
3. We worship God revealed in Jesus Christ, the eternal Word of God made flesh; who lived our human life, died for sinners on the cross; who was raised from the dead, and proclaimed by the apostles, Son of God; who lives eternally, as saviour and sovereign, coming in judgement and mercy, to bring us to eternal life.
4. We worship God, ever present in the Holy Spirit; who brings this Gospel to fruition, assures us of forgiveness, strengthens us to do God's will, and makes us sisters and brothers of Jesus, sons and daughters of God.
5. We believe in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, united in heaven and on earth: on earth, the Body of Christ, empowered by the Spirit to glorify God and to serve humanity; in heaven, eternally one with the power, the wisdom and the love of God in Trinity.
6. We believe that, in the fullness of time, God will renew and gather in one all things in heaven and on earth through Christ, and be perfectly honoured and adored.

7. We rejoice in God who has given us being, who shares our humanity to bring us to glory, our source of prayer and power of praise; to whom be glory, praise and adoration, now and evermore.

## F. Considering our neighbours

21. People are deeply sensitive about both their religious language and the role of gender in society. We need to take care where possible not to offend one another, even as we seek not to be too easily offended ourselves. Some have determined not to use gendered pronouns of God at all so as to avoid causing offence. Although expressions like 'Godself' appear somewhat clunky to us now, within a comparatively short time we are likely to get used to them. For those who continue to use gender suggestive pronouns such as 'he' or 'she' we need to keep reminding ourselves that there is nothing determinatively male or female in the being, character or attributes of God and that we use such words metaphorically.
22. As to our Trinitarian formulations, there appears to be no theological reason why we may not find alternative, gender-sensitive words of the three divine persons who have in common the one being of God. The difficulty we have is rather an ecumenical one. The expression Father, Son and Holy Spirit is deeply embedded in the Christian tradition and has strong biblical support.

*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. (Mt28:19).*

23. If we as a church avoided this expression altogether in our worship, it might well drive a wedge between us and the Orthodox, Catholic and Anglican communions as well as others for whom such changes are not at present conceivable. The formal addition of the *filioque* clause ('and the Son') in the Nicene Creed in the eleventh century played a significant role in the breach between the Western and Eastern Churches. To harden our present ecclesial divisions by introducing changes in our Trinitarian formulae in the act of baptism, for instance, would be a high cost for a denomination which believes it is called to facilitate unity in the wider Christian community. However, our human language of the divine is always inadequate, and so there is every reason to encourage one other to use a rich variety of scripturally inspired expressions or metaphors in referring to God.
24. Indeed we as a church have already committed ourselves to the use of such language, at General Assembly in 2014.

General Assembly affirms the commitment made in 1984 to use inclusive language in all publications. It now seeks to build on that commitment by encouraging all those who lead and participate in worship, all those who train worship leaders – including resource centres for learning and lay preachers conferences, children's and youth leaders, local churches and synods, to explore and give intentional consideration to their use of inclusive and expansive language in worship. (Resolution 15, 2014 General Assembly)

It offers this helpful explanation of what is meant by such language:

Inclusive language affirms all human beings, their sexuality, gender, ethnic and cultural background, stages of maturity, disability, and mental health. Expansive language aims to use as many names and metaphors for God as possible – to stretch the imagination towards God, in order to allow us to discover that there is novelty, challenge and joyful surprise in our encounter with the divine. (Page 95 of the Book of Reports 2014).

## Questions for discussion

1. Do you view God as male? Why?
2. Can the personal pronouns 'he', 'his' and 'him' be properly used with reference to God?
3. It is helpful to continue to speak of God as 'Our Father' in our public worship?
4. Should we as a church relook at our affirmation of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in baptismal services?
5. What are some of the ways we might refer to God that would help us to a wider appreciation of a God who is beyond gender?