Inclusive God-Language

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Over the course of the past few decades, it has become common among many English-speaking Christians and in many churches (such as my own, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, or ELCA) to maintain that, when possible, we should avoid using the masculine pronouns "he," "his," "him," and "himself" to refer to God. It is argued that to speak of God as if God were male perpetuates patriarchy, androcentrism, and hierarchical thought, and thus promotes gender inequity. In the words of Mary Daly, "if God is male then male is God."[1] Thus in many circles it has become standard practice to use gender-neutral or gender-free language when alluding to God. The thinking is that this is the best way to address the problem of conveying and perpetrating concepts of God that are non-egalitarian and therefore oppressive, not only for women but also for other persons who do not identify themselves as male in gender. Of course, as liberation theologians have often stressed, whenever oppression exists it is not only the oppressed but the oppressors who suffer. Therefore, if the use of masculine pronouns to refer to God promotes things such as patriarchy, androcentrism, and hierarchical thought, males cannot truly be said to benefit from these things, since anything that promotes injustice and oppression is harmful to all and does not actually serve anyone's interests.

I would certainly agree with the claim that the exclusive use of masculine pronouns when referring to God has tended to promote gender inequity and injustice. At the same time, however, I would argue that to refuse to use personal pronouns to refer to God ends up doing more harm than good. The reason for this is that, once we begin using a term such as "Godself" rather than "himself" when speaking of God and employ the designation "God" repeatedly in a phrase such as: "For God so loved the world that God gave God's only-begotten Son" (John 3:16),[2] I am convinced that we end up depersonalizing God, that is, depriving God of God's personhood, or at least diminishing it considerably. Because all persons have gender, when God no longer has a gender, God ceases to be viewed as a person. Furthermore, in order to avoid constantly

[1] Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 19. Prof. Daly (1928–2010) was an American radical feminist philosopher and theologian. I feel that it is important to add that, while I certainly understand the assertion: "if God is male then male is God," I would nevertheless disagree with it strongly. Even if God is viewed as male in some sense, it does not follow that males can be equated with God on that basis or that non-males should be called on to submit to males as if they were God, since no human being is ever to be equated or identified with God or to be regarded as standing in the same type of relation to other human beings that the biblical texts and the Christian faith ascribe to God alone.

[2] Many advocate translating the Greek *huios* as "child" rather than "Son" when characterizing Jesus' relation to God, yet the belief that the *huios tou theou* (Son of God) became a male when he became human has led most Christians to allude to "him" with the use of masculine pronouns even in "his" preexistent state. The question of whether to use gender-free language to speak of God's "Word," who existed as and with God "from the beginning" (John 1:1-2), is closely related to the question of whether to use such language to refer to God. When Greek speakers referred to that Word as the *Logos*, they used a word of masculine gender; yet it was also common to speak of God's preexistent *huios* or *Logos* as God's *sophia*, which is feminine. Due to space limitations, however, I will not discuss this question in the present article.

repeating the word "God" when we speak of God without the use of pronouns—which tends to sound extremely awkward, since that is not the way that we normally speak about persons in English—, we are continually forced to alter what we say about God and must resort endlessly to circumlocutions. This awkwardness can lead us to limit the ways in which we refer to God and even to mention God as little as possible when we talk about our faith and beliefs. Such a practice can therefore deter us from proclaiming the gospel freely or impede us from presenting the gospel in ways that we might present it otherwise. Avoiding overly repetitive allusions to God and "Godself" then becomes more important than communicating the ideas and beliefs that we wish to share regarding God.

The Use of Gender-Neutral Language for God among Theologians and Biblical Scholars

In order to illustrate these points, we may consider passages from the writings of a number of contemporary theologians and biblical scholars who speak of God in this way. Thus, for example, British theologian Tom Greggs writes in a recent work: "The God who is glorious, perfectly in and of Godself, has determined Godself in this way to be the God who creates, who binds Godself (covenants) with the creature as creature for all eternity."[3] Echoing the same type of language, Jeannine Michele Graham affirms: "Though complete in Godself as the One triune God who exists in the fullness of dynamic loving communion, God decided to share God's love with a partner outside Godself."[4] After referring to "God's decision to *constitute* Godself as the triune God...," Lisa Powell speaks of "God's decision to enter into covenant relationship outside Godself. That is to say: God exists in interpenetrating, abundant love 'before' God determines Godself to be a God of covenant. God's triune nature grounds God's decision to create and be a god of relationship with something other than Godself."[5] In his work on Jesus' death and atonement, Fred Anderson refers to God in similar fashion: "Evil, sin, and death have done their worst. They have unleashed all their power against the Son, and God has taken all of that into Godself. God has not only experienced what it means to lose a beloved Son, suffering his death. In doing so, God has tasted death Godself. The Triune God has taken in evil, sin, and death within Godself...."[6]

While some Christians are no doubt accustomed to hearing God spoken of in this manner, in my ears such language not only sounds foreign and odd but also seems to be referring to a

[3] Tom Greggs, *The Church in a World of Religions: Working Papers in Theology*, ed. J. Thomas Hewitt (London: T & T Clark, 2022), 48. Prof. Greggs holds the Marischal Chair of Divinity at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland and was formerly Head of Divinity at the university.

[4] Jeannine Michele Graham, *Representation and Substitution in the Atonement Theologies of Dorothee Sölle, John Macquarrie, and Karl Barth*, American University Studies, Series VII, Theology and Religion 230 (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 198. Dr. Graham obtained her Ph.D. in systematic theology from the University of Aberdeen in Scotland.

[5] Lisa Powell, "The Disabled God and Covenant Ontology," in *Karl Barth and Liberation theology*, ed. Kaitlyn Dugan and Paul Dafydd Jones, T & T Clark Explorations in Reformed Theology (London: T & T Clark, 2023), 69-83 (74). Prof. Powell is Department Chair and the Director of Women and Gender Studies at St. Ambrose University in Davenport, Iowa.

[6] Fred R. Anderson, *Why Did Jesus Die and What Does That Have to Do with Me? A Biblical and Sacramental Understanding of Atonement* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2022), 224. Rev. Dr. Anderson is a Presbyterian pastor and theologian in New York City.

God who is very different from the God in whom I have believed since my childhood. Personally, whenever I hear or read the term "Godself," not only do I have a hard time conceiving in my mind what that term refers to, but the "God" of whose "self" we speak sounds strange and alien to me as well. Such a term does not seem to represent faithfully or accurately the caring, intimate, and gracious being whom I call "God," and much less to endear or attract me to that God. In fact, I would say that speaking of God in that way even *estranges* and *alienates* me from the God to whom "Godself" refers, as if that God were some distant, amorphous, abstract force or being rather than the type of person of whom the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures speak.

At times when I hear or read this type of language used in relation to God, it sounds to me as if different Gods are being spoken of simultaneously and that "Godself" is some impersonal entity or reality to which the God mentioned relates in some way. Thus, for example, when it is said that God, "perfectly in and of Godself, has determined Godself in this way to be the God who creates, who binds Godself (covenants) with the creature as creature for all eternity," this "Godself" seems to me to be some abstract reality that is almost independent or separable from God. Similarly, when I read that "God decided to share God's love with a partner outside Godself," I get the impression that one God decided to share the love of a second God with a partner that is outside of the nebulous and obscure "Godself" mentioned at the end of the sentence. My reaction is much the same when I hear it said that "God determines Godself to be a God of covenant" and that "God has taken in evil, sin, and death within Godself." From my perspective, the affirmation that "God has tasted death Godself" even sounds confusing, as if the verb "tasted" had two direct objects: death and Godself, both of which were tasted by this God. In addition, when the author refers to Jesus merely as "the Son," as he does throughout his book, apparently in order not to use the possessive pronoun "his" so as to affirm that God saw *his* Son suffer and lost *his* beloved Son when Jesus died, he seems to distance this Son from God as the one whom the New Testament refers to as Jesus' Father. The effect is the same as if one were to translate John 3:16 as: "For God so loved the world that God gave the only-begotten Son" (John 3:16). The question immediately arises: *whose* only-begotten Son? Even if one instead speaks of Jesus as God's Son so as to affirm that "God so loved the world that God gave God's only-begotten Son," it still sounds almost as if one were speaking of several Gods: one who loved the world, another who has an only-begotten Son, and another who gave that Son.

Similar problems arise when considering the work of biblical scholars who avoid as much as possible the use of personal pronouns when speaking of the God of the Bible. Several passages from the collected essays of Old Testament scholar Terence Fretheim are helpful for explaining this point:

> [T]he idea that the divine is active in history is not unique to Israel.... God gives the divine name(s) to Israel, thereby identifying the divine self as a distinctive member of the community of those who have names.[7]
>
> The present and active God acts in the world within committed relationships in accordance with the divine will.[8]

[7] Terence E. Fretheim, *What Kind of God? Collected Essays of Terence E. Fretheim*, ed. Michael J. Chan and Brent A. Strawn, Siphrut: Literature and Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures 14 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 61. Prof. Fretheim (1936–2020) taught Old Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota for 45 years prior to his retirement in 2013.

[8] Ibid., 68.

> Israel may not *know* how God is working out the divine will in such circumstances, and deeply question God, but that does not mean that God has a divided will with regard to the divine purpose.[9]
>
> God wills to be known [and] has revealed God's self in manifold ways....[10]
>
> God thereby limits the divine options in responding to the world's sin and evil.... The God who so puts constraints upon the divine activity is the God whose response to human wickedness "grieved him to his heart" (Gen 6:5-6).[11]
>
> God seems to be able to work in and through the natural order at will, wherever and whenever God wills to accomplish the divine purpose.[12]
>
> God limits both the divine power and the divine freedom because God is committed to the sharing of power and freedom with the creatures.... God does not remain aloof and, like some divine mechanic, seek to work on the world from the outside. God personally involves the divine self in its life and chooses to work from within.[13]
>
> God did not exhaust the divine creativity in the first week of the world.... God identifies a problem within the divine creative work up to this point and moves to find a solution....[14]
>
> [Commenting on the Book of Jonah:] So, it is possible that God would have changed the divine mind even apart from Nineveh's repentance, on the grounds of divine compassion alone (4:11).... God's concern for justice is tempered by the divine slowness to anger (4:2).... Here God vulnerably appears to take the evil of Nineveh upon the divine self.... God seeks to convince Jonah of certain understandings regarding God....[15]

These affirmations reflect the same problems as those just considered above. Once again, at times it may seem as if two different Gods are being spoken of. This is especially evident in this last passage: "God seeks to convince Jonah of certain understandings regarding God." Here one God seems to be speaking to Jonah regarding a second God. While Fretheim does not use the term "Godself" but instead speaks of "God's self," the God to whom he refers comes across as an abstract, distant, and ill-defined being, almost as if he were speaking of some*thing* rather than some*one*. This is especially the case in the first passage cited, where he simply refers to God as "the divine" so as to affirm that "the divine is active in history." When God is referenced in this manner, in my mind the question arises as to whether we are talking about a person or instead some impersonal force or power.

In many of these passages, in fact, Fretheim prefers to use "the divine" in place of the possessive pronoun "his" or even the possessive form "God's." Thus, rather than speaking of God's name, God's will, God's purpose, and God's self, he alludes to the divine name, will, purpose, and self, apparently because he wishes to avoid as much as possible the overly repetitive use of "God" in some of these sentences. The fact that this type of language depersonalizes God becomes evident if we compare the affirmations made by Fretheim with those affirmations as they would appear with the use of masculine personal pronouns:

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[9] Ibid., 77.

[10] Ibid., 99.

[11] Ibid., 100.

[12] Ibid., 108.

[13] Ibid., 163.

[14] Ibid., 200.

[15] Ibid., 324-325.

God gives the divine name to Israel
vs.
God gives his name to Israel

God acts in the world in accordance with the divine will
vs.
God acts in the world in accordance with his will

God limits both the divine power and the divine freedom
vs.
God limits both his power and his freedom

God did not exhaust the divine creativity in the first week of the world
vs.
God did not exhaust his creativity in the first week of the world

God would have changed the divine mind
vs.
God would have changed his mind

We can also see how foreign and odd such language regarding God is by making the same type of affirmations regarding a "normal" person. Thus, for example, we can replace "God" with the name "Peter," from which the adjective "Petrine" is formed:

> Peter gives the Petrine name to this people, thereby identifying the Petrine self as a distinctive member of the community of those who have names.
>
> Peter acts in accordance with the Petrine will.
>
> Peter wills to be known [and] has revealed Peter's self in manifold ways.
>
> Peter limits the Petrine options in responding to the world's sin and evil.
>
> Peter wills to accomplish the Petrine purpose.
>
> Peter limits the Petrine power and the Petrine freedom because Peter is committed to the sharing of power and freedom.
>
> Peter did not exhaust the Petrine creativity.... Peter identifies a problem within the Petrine creative work and moves to find a solution.
>
> Peter would have changed the Petrine mind.

Obviously, this is not the way we talk about normal persons. Who in the world would ever make this last affirmation rather than simply affirming, "Peter changed his mind"? Or who would speak of "the Petrine name," "the Petrine will," or "the Petrine purpose" rather than referring to Peter's name, his will, and his purpose? When one hears or reads of "the Petrine self," "the Petrine power," "the Petrine freedom," and "the Petrine creativity," how can one not get the impression that the allusion is to some abstract, vague, impersonal reality that can be clearly defined only with the help of a psychologist, philosopher, or scientist who is accustomed to speaking in such terms?

One further problem reflected in Fretheim's work is that at times he finds it necessary to use masculine pronouns for God, despite his rejection of such a practice throughout most of his work. This is especially the case when he cites biblical texts, as he does above when quoting Gen 6:5-6 to speak of "the God whose response to human wickedness 'grieved him to his heart'." Elsewhere Fretheim affirms that in Ezek 22:30-31 "God poured out his wrath," even though a few sentences later he carefully avoids the masculine personal pronoun "his" when he writes: "God can decide for the sake of God's own purposes to withhold wrath (E.g., Ezek 20:21b-22) or turn wrath away (Isa 12:1)."[16] Here this "wrath" that God withholds or turns away seems to be some abstract entity that exists on its own independently

[16] Ibid., 152.

of God, a problem that would be avoided were Fretheim to use personal pronouns to speak of God withholding *his* wrath and turning *his* wrath away.

The same passage offers an example of the circumlocutions that scholars such as Fretheim make in order to avoid using masculine personal pronouns for God. Immediately following the sentence just quoted, Fretheim continues: "The parade example of this divine move is Hosea 11:9; God chooses not to 'execute his wrath' for God's own reasons. Wrath has been provoked in Yahweh by human infidelity, but God chooses not to let it go forward to work (complete?) the deed of judgment."[17] The same type of circumlocution is evident when Fretheim uses the passive voice to avoid using the personal pronoun "he" or repeating the term "God": "In the creative process, God also speaks with that which has already been created, with the earth, the waters, and the human beings...."[18] By referring to the earth, the waters, and the human beings as "that which has already been created," the fact that according to Genesis it is *God himself* who created these things and people is obscured and any reference to God's personal agency in creation is omitted. The use of such language is comparable to affirming that "Peter spoke with the children that had been seen" rather than "Peter spoke with the children he saw" in order to avoid referring to Peter with the pronoun "he." Fretheim's reluctance to use the possessive pronoun "his" when affirming that "God is committed to the sharing of power and freedom with the creatures" in another passage quoted above similarly distances those creatures from God once again. In contrast, the affirmation that God shares power and freedom with *his* creatures conveys much more clearly the personal and intimate relationship between God and those creatures as the one who made and formed them.

At the same time, Fretheim's occasional use of masculine personal pronouns to refer to God, especially when quoting Scripture passages that make use of those pronouns, seems to defeat the whole purpose of avoiding masculine personal pronouns elsewhere. Once he has referred to God with masculine pronouns in his text, from that point on the readers will conceive of the God of whom Fretheim speaks as a male rather than a God with no gender, even when he repeatedly avoids masculine pronouns elsewhere. Thus, even when he does not use pronouns to affirm that "God wills to be known [and] has revealed God's self in manifold ways" and that "God seeks to convince Jonah of certain understandings regarding God," the readers who have seen Fretheim use masculine pronouns elsewhere in the same context will conceive of this God as male in gender in their minds or imagination.

The same problem arises with the use of the name "Yahweh" in the work of Old Testament scholars who avoid using masculine pronouns to refer to Israel's God. Anyone acquainted with Old Testament theology will be well aware that throughout the Hebrew Bible Yahweh or YHWH is spoken and conceived of as male in gender. Thus, even when one avoids using masculine pronouns to refer to YHWH, the readers will inevitably conceive of him as male rather than female or as a person devoid of gender. Of course, when the title "Lord" is used to translate YHWH, generally by writing the last three letters of that title with small caps as "LORD," most readers will also imagine in their minds a divine being or person who is of the male gender. Thus, whether one uses some form of God's name in Hebrew or replaces it with LORD, attempts to bring the readers to conceive of the God being spoken of as someone who is free of gender rather than being masculine will for the most part be unsuccessful.

[17] Ibid., 152-153.

[18] Ibid., 29.

The fact that both the Old and the New Testaments also refer to God with the use of terms such as "Father," "Husband," and "King" in addition to "Lord" also inevitably leads readers to conceive of the God of the Bible as male in gender, even when the use of masculine pronouns is avoided when referring to that God. In principle, one might choose to refer to God with gender-neutral terms such as "Parent," "Spouse," "Monarch," or "Ruler" when translating the biblical texts, yet for most people this would sound extremely odd and would also lead them once more to conceive of a being who is relatively abstract, cold, distant, and ill-defined. To address God as "my Parent" rather than "my Father" or even "Abba," as Jesus and Paul do, or refer to God as the "Monarch of glory" rather than the "King of glory" in a passage such as Psalm 24:7-10 would sound very strange to most people. In the case of the latter passage, one would still need to solve the problem of how to translate the allusion to "the LORD of hosts" who is said to be "the King of glory" in the final verse of the Psalm if one wishes to use gender-neutral or gender-free language to refer to the God of Israel there.

Of course, one might simply attempt to avoid making any reference to passages from the Bible that speak of God as Father or as King in order not to convey the idea that God is of the male gender. Yet this would involve assuming a selective approach to the biblical texts, ignoring or in effect eliminating from those texts allusions to God that convey ideas and imagery regarding "him" that one finds problematic or displeasing. As mentioned above, this is the same type of approach taken by many theologians, biblical scholars, and church leaders today, who find it so challenging to speak of God without using personal pronouns to refer to that God that they often prefer to mention God as little as possible when writing or speaking.

All those who have dedicated time and energy to reflecting on this subject know very well how complicated and controversial it is. Even to talk about it upsets many people, including not only those who have been deeply hurt by the traditional ways in which we refer to God and thus insist on changes, but also those who want to continue using the same type of gendered language for God that has been predominant for centuries, and thus is regarded as standard. I would insist, together with many others, that in reality there is no solution to this problem that is entirely satisfactory. One of the phrases I continually repeat to my students is: "Every perspective is problematic—including yours and mine." Any who claim to have the definitive solution to problems such as this one, therefore, believing that they know how to speak of God in ways that are *not* problematic, are deceiving themselves. Even if we succeed in using language for God that does not promote things such as patriarchy, androcentrism, and hierarchical thought, that language will inevitably raise other problems and issues that affect the manner in which we think and conceive of the God of Israel, Jesus, the biblical texts, and the Christian faith.

Keeping God Personal—as a Person

While I agree that the long-standing custom of using only masculine pronouns to refer to God is highly problematic, I would also insist that there are some very good things which that custom promotes. Among these is the ability to speak freely and naturally about God—that is, about "him"—without having to resort endlessly to circumlocutions. In certain ways, it also allows us to reflect more accurately and faithfully the conception of God that we find in the Christian Scriptures, where it is almost impossible to find exceptions to the rule of speaking of God as if God were male. From my perspective, once we begin distancing ourselves from the concept of God that

runs throughout our Bible, the God of whom we speak ceases to have the same liberating and transforming power as the God proclaimed by Israel's prophets as well as Jesus and his apostles. Undoubtedly, as many scholars have insisted—including especially feminist scholars—, the biblical allusions to God and the concepts behind many of those allusions can also be oppressive at times. However, I would insist that in many cases what has been oppressive are the *interpretations* traditionally given to our Scriptures rather than those Scriptures themselves.

According to my reading of the biblical texts, the most basic and essential characteristic of the God proclaimed in both the Old and the New Testaments is not only the love of that God for all people "equally, unconditionally, and unreservedly,"[19] but the *fully personal* nature of that God. I do not believe that we can speak of a God who loves the world in that way without affirming that God is a *person*.[20] Impersonal realities or things cannot love, at least not in the way we commonly understand love. However, neither can *personal* realities or things love. Only a God who is not only "personal"—a designation which paradoxically can be used even of non-persons—but is actually *a person* and is spoken of as such can truly love human beings with "his" whole being and call on human beings to love one another as well.

To stress this point, I need only rephrase what I have just written by affirming, "only a God who is actually a person can truly love human beings with God's whole being." This rephrased affirmation is problematic not only in that it seems to speak of God in an abstract and perhaps even impersonal way, but also in that it tends to imply that "God's whole being" refers to something or someone distinct from the first God mentioned, as if a first God loved us with the whole being of a second and distinct God. Because it is confusing and complicates thinking about God, such a usage sacrifices the idea that God "himself" loves human beings with "his" whole being in order to avoid perpetrating the oppressive idea that God is male in gender. From my perspective, such a "solution" only makes things worse, since I regard as oppressive anything that diminishes the biblical idea that God is a person who loves all people unconditionally with "his" whole being—we might even say with all "his" heart, soul, mind, and strength, in the same way that we are to love "him" (Mark 12:30).

Of course, to speak of God's heart, soul, mind, and strength is to use anthropomorphisms and to imply that God has a heart, soul, mind, and some type of body as well, in the way that human beings do. Yet this is precisely the God whom we find throughout both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, which consistently ascribe to God human attributes that have to do not only with spiritual or emotional aspects but also physical characteristics. In the Bible, God has a face, eyes, ears, a mouth, a mind, arms, hands, a heart, a bosom, entrails, a right and left side, and even a back or "behind" (see Exod 33:23). While it is no doubt problematic to use such anthropomorphisms when speaking of God, at the same time their use in the biblical texts conveys clearly the idea that God is not merely a personal being but an actual *person*. In addition, because the only language that human beings can use is human language, ultimately we have no choice but to use

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[19] See thesis 1 of my *94 Theses*, https://94t.mx/94-theses/.

[20] Of course, according to the doctrine of the Trinity, God is actually *three* persons. Yet I would nevertheless insist that it is proper and necessary to speak of God as *a single* person as well, whether we are referring to the "triune God" or to the God traditionally considered the "first person" of the Trinity. The Triune God is not some*thing* but some*one*, a "who" rather than a "what."

anthropomorphic language when we speak of God.

What seems to me to demonstrate more clearly than anything else the impossibility of representing faithfully biblical thought regarding God without using gendered pronouns to refer to God is the fact that, to my knowledge, even among those who advocate gender-neutral or gender-free language concerning God, no translations of the entire Christian Bible that make consistent and exclusive use of such language have found widespread acceptance. While as Christians we can use circumlocutions to find ways of alluding to God today without the use of personal pronouns, many passages from our Scriptures simply cannot be translated into English in a way that is readily comprehensible, agreeable to our ears, and in continuity with the original meaning of the passage in question without following the practice of those Scriptures of using gendered pronouns to refer to God.

Although the use of masculine pronouns and anthropomorphic language to refer to God throughout the Bible is undoubtedly problematic in many ways, it allows the authors of the biblical texts to speak of God as someone who relates intimately and passionately to human beings on a deeply personal basis. In contrast, from my perspective, the gender-neutral or gender-free language used for God in many circles today does the opposite. Even when those who use such language speak of God's love, the image of God that comes across to me is not very endearing or attractive—much less enthralling, captivating, or enrapturing!—, nor does it excite in me the immense joy, peace, gratitude, love, and consolation that many of the authors of the biblical texts describe when they speak of their relationship with God. In order to stress this point, we may consider once again the affirmations made regarding God by Jeannine Michele Graham and Lisa Powell already cited above: "God decided to share God's love with a partner outside Godself"; "God exists in interpenetrating, abundant love 'before' God determines Godself to be a God of covenant. God's triune nature grounds God's decision to create and be a god of relationship with something other than Godself." In my ears, even though these passages speak of God's love, the God who comes across in both of these citations is an impersonal, abstract, distant being or force rather than the God before whom David sang and danced with unrestrained joy and glee or the God whom Jesus addressed as "Abba" and portrayed as a father deeply in love with his prodigal son in Luke 15.

In fact, I would go so far as to argue that the gender-neutral language that many Christians use for God ends up neutering, castrating, and sterilizing the God of Scripture and Jesus. By depersonalizing God and referring to him in ways that come across as abstract, cold, and detached, such language diminishes the power, passion, force, and impact that the biblical allusions to God possess. This "neutered" God hardly seems to me to be the intimate, intense, and impassioned person with whom figures such as Moses, Jeremiah, and other of Israel's prophets interact in the Hebrew Bible, nor does this God speak with the same fervor, energy, and emotion as the God of the Psalmists and the apostle Paul does. Personally, the God to whom I relate is not some amorphous, abstract, or impersonal force or power but the one who makes me lie down in green pastures, leads me beside the still waters, restores my soul, and comforts me with his rod and staff as he walks alongside of me to shepherd me through the valley of the shadow of death, as well as the God who not only prepares a table for me personally in order to anoint my head with oil but also invites people of all nations to a lavish feast on his mountain and promises to wipe away himself every tear from their faces and turn their pain, sorrow, and mourning into gladness and

rejoicing as he makes his dwelling in their midst (Ps 23:1-4; Isa 25:6-8; Rev 21:1-4).

So while I agree wholeheartedly that we must fight with all our might against patriarchy, androcentrism, and gender inequity, which are indeed tremendous evils that have done great harm to all of us over the centuries, I do not believe that the way to do this is by avoiding personal pronouns when speaking of God and using language that neuters, castrates, and sterilizes him. For that reason, I believe it is important to explore other alternatives to the use of gender-neutral or gender-free language for God.

The Use of Gender-Inclusive Language for God

One of the options open to those who wish to avoid the exclusive use of masculine personal pronouns to refer to God in the third person, of course, is to use *feminine* pronouns. Thus, for example, we could translate the first words of John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that she gave her only-begotten Son." As I will argue below, I am convinced that such a usage is preferable to that of avoiding masculine pronouns when speaking of God. Obviously, however, to exchange feminine pronouns for masculine ones in every case in order to speak of God exclusively as if "she" were female would be to go to the other extreme and could also be seen as promoting gender inequity in a different way, though it might help to correct somewhat the gender imbalance that exists currently among most English speakers. Such a practice could also be criticized for leading to the conclusion that, "if God is female then female is God." We would then simply be exchanging one form of gender inequity for another.

Another alternative to the exclusive use of masculine personal pronouns to refer to God would be to use the plural forms "they," "their," "them," and "themselves" when speaking of God. The use of these third person plural pronouns to refer to individuals who do not identify as either (exclusively) male or female has become increasingly common in recent years, yet in the ears of many people it continues to sound strange and foreign. This is clear from the the translation of John 3:16 that would result: "For God so loved the world that they gave their only-begotten Son." As the use of these third person plural pronouns to refer to individuals becomes more common and more people become accustomed to that practice, however, this manner of referring to God may grow increasingly acceptable among many Christians. One of its advantages is that it does not depersonalize God in the way that the avoidance of personal pronouns when referring to God does. It is worth noting as well that the use of the plural personal pronouns might be regarded as especially appropriate when speaking of the God of the Hebrew Bible, since there the plural form "gods" (*elohim*) is used to refer to YHWH, the God of Israel.

A third option is that of using one of the alternative third-person personal pronouns or "neopronouns" that have been coined when speaking of God. These include "ze," "xe," and "ey," among others. Each of these, of course, requires not only a nominative form but also a possessive or genitive form to replace "his" and "her(s)," an accusative form to replace "him" and "her," and a reflexive form to replace "himself" and "herself." Among these non-gendered pronouns, the one that seems to have become most widely accepted in recent years is "ze," for which a couple of different options for the possessive and accusative forms exist: "ze/hir/hirs" and "ze/zir/zirs." The use of these neopronouns would leave us with translations of John 3:16 such as the following: "For God so loved the world that ze sent hir only-begotten Son," or: "For God so loved the world that ze sent zir only-begotten Son." We may also consider the use of these neopronouns in a sentence in which all of the forms associated with each of them appear:

"Because ze loves me, God has made hirself known to me through hir presence in my life so as to bring me to faith in hir and make my life hirs"; or: "Because ze loves me, God has made zirself known to me through zir presence in my life so as to bring me to faith in zir and make my life zirs." If we instead opt to avoid personal pronouns, then we are back to: "Because God loves me, God has made Godself known to me through God's presence in my life so as to bring me to faith in God and make my life God's." Here again, in my ears, this repeated use of the word "God" seems to suggest once more that we are speaking of more than one God and tends to depersonalize God as well.

As is the case with the use of the third-person plural pronouns "they/them/theirs" to refer to individuals, as English speakers become accustomed to hearing and using neopronouns such as "ze," their usage to refer to God will become more widely accepted. Once again, the advantage of the use of these non-gendered pronouns or neopronouns to refer to God is that they do not depersonalize God in the way that the gender-neutral practice of avoiding the use of pronouns when speaking of God does.

Of course, all of these ways of speaking of God are problematic for different reasons, just as the use of personal pronouns that are exclusively masculine in gender to refer to God is problematic. In principle, it might be argued that one or another of these different possibilities for referring to God is preferable to the others and should be used exclusively. In that case, the only viable options available to those who prefer to use gender-neutral language for God would be to avoid the use of personal pronouns for God or else use forms of the third personal plural pronoun "they" or neopronouns such as "ze" when speaking of God.

Rather than thinking and speaking in terms of *gender-neutral* language for God, however, I would propose that we instead use *gender-inclusive* language. The difference between these two proposals would be that gender-neutral language would involve refraining from assigning any type of gender to God when speaking of God, as if God had no gender or were free of gender, whereas gender-inclusive language would involve conceiving of God as possessing more than one gender, and in particular both the male and female genders that are expressed in the two types of personal pronouns traditionally used in English to refer to individuals. While there are good reasons for using gender-neutral pronouns and language to refer to God, personally I prefer to think in terms of using pronouns and language that are gender-inclusive. In my mind, the language of neutrality suggests the idea of "neither/nor" and therefore can imply the lack or absence of gender when used to speak of a person, in this case God. From my perspective, rather than conceiving of God as a person who has no gender or whose gender is neither male or female, it is preferable to refer to God as someone who may be associated with either gender, both male and female. Thus, for example, rather than imagining God as someone who is neither a father nor a mother, it seems to me to be much better to see God as one who is *both* a father *and* a mother to human beings. A God who is neither father nor mother to us or is simply our "parent" no longer comes across as a warm, intimate, and caring God who loves all human beings with great passion and tenderness. It should also be noted that the imagery of God as a mother is by no means foreign to the biblical texts.[21]

For me, what matters most is that we not "castrate," "sterilize," or "neuter" God and the gospel, which I believe we do when we refuse to refer to God with the use of pronouns, including not only "he" and "she" but also "they" and "ze."

[21] See, for example, Deut 32:11-12, 18; Isa 46:3-4; 49:15; 66:12-13; Hos 11:34; 13:8; cf. Matt 23:37.

When I say that, by no means do I wish to deny the personhood or capacity to love of those who have been castrated or sterilized, whether voluntarily or involuntarily; nor would I ever affirm that they have been rendered "impotent" in any way except that of no longer being able to procreate children of their own, or that people who have been castrated or sterilized have lost their gender, so that they may no longer identify themselves as fully male or female if they choose to do so. Instead, I have in mind the idea of forcefully and violently stripping God of his, *her, and their* gender, which I am convinced would be contrary to God's will. I would argue that God wishes to be known, regarded, and approached *as a person*, because God *is* a person; and as mentioned above, I believe that *to be a person is to have gender*. Most English dictionaries offer as a second or third definition of "castrate" something along the lines of "to deprive of vitality, vigor, or force." Similarly, they define "sterilize" in terms of making someone or something sterile, infertile, unfruitful, barren, and even lacking in originality or emotive force. From my perspective, we must not deprive God of her power to *give life in creative, transforming, vibrant, and wondrous ways that leave us speechless, breathless, and deeply in love with her*. Nor must we mutilate God or render him impotent by turning him into some type of arcane, dispassionate, and amorphous being with no eyes to wink at us, no mouth to smile playfully at us, no face to beam brightly at us, no arms to cradle us, no hands to caress us, no lap for us to sit on contentedly, and no breast or bosom for us to cuddle against tightly. Rather, we must let God be himself, the person he *wants* to be in relation to us, our loving "Abba," while at the same time letting her be *herself* as our friend, companion, grandmother, comforter, role model, and confidant. For me, none of these are things that "Godself" can do.

Alternating between Feminine and Masculine Pronouns for God

From my perspective, the least problematic solution to the difficulties discussed above would be to alternate between the use of masculine and feminine pronouns when referring to God, while also using non-gendered pronouns such as "they" and "ze" at times. In this way, we *make God inclusive* and avoid depersonalizing God.

While many Christians who are concerned for gender equity and inclusivity might prefer to avoid using the masculine and feminine pronouns "he" and "she" when referring to God in order to use "they" or a neopronoun such as "ze" exclusively, I would argue that it is important to continue to use "he" and "she" as well. The reason for this is that the use of both masculine and feminine imagery when speaking of God is able to convey and stress certain aspects of God's personhood and personality that gender-neutral or gender-free language does not.

Thus, for example, when most people think of womanhood or femininity, they tend to associate it with characteristics such as love, tenderness, caring, and compassion. In contrast, to be masculine is generally understood in terms of being strong, firm, and assertive. By speaking of God as both female and male, we are able to ascribe all of these qualities to God to a greater degree than we could if we avoided speaking of God with the use of feminine and masculine pronouns. When we wish to stress God's intimate, caring, and tender nature, we might therefore use feminine pronouns to refer to *her*, yet when we wish to emphasize God's power and strength, we could do so by using masculine pronouns to refer to *him*.

At the same time, of course, it would be important to call into question and challenge these traditional stereotypes regarding gender. We must learn to associate traits such as firmness, strength, power, and assertiveness in a good sense with

women and femininity, just as we must learn to associate traits such as tenderness, caring, and compassion with men and masculinity. The use of both male and female pronouns when referring to God would allow for this. One could use female pronouns when ascribing to God traits that are traditionally considered masculine and use male pronouns when ascribing to God traits that are traditionally viewed as feminine. By speaking of God both as "she" and "he," we attribute both feminine and masculine traits to *the same person*, thus reinforcing the idea that a human person, whether male or female, can and should possess *all* of these positive traits and that they are not exclusively feminine or masculine.

This is particularly significant given the fact that in the New Testament we are called to be "imitators of God" (Eph 5:1; cf. Matt 5:43-48). If we understand this in terms of imitating a God who is both a "he" *and* a "she," we are led to understand such imitation in terms of replicating positive traits and behavior commonly associated with both males and females, and therefore calling into question and even subverting the idea that certain traits and behavior are more characteristic of one gender in particular. The idea of exhorting believers in Christ to imitate God offers another example of why I think we should abandon the practice of avoiding personal pronouns when referring to God. To proclaim to others, "God calls you to live, think, and behave like God *herself*," or alternatively, "God calls you to live, think, and behave like God *himself*," is much more powerful, vivid, galvanizing, and thought-provoking than to tell an audience, "God calls you to live, think, and behave like Godself"—or should we instead say, "like God's own self," or perhaps "like God in Godself"? In my ears, the latter exhortations not only fail to inspire and impact me in the way that the first two do, but also leave me asking myself how I can live, think, and behave like some numinous, ethereal, figureless supreme being and precisely what such an imitation should look like.

Of course, in our culture there are also *negative traits* commonly associated with femininity and masculinity. Due especially to the work of feminist scholars, we have become well aware of the fact that, in the minds of many women (and men as well), the language of God as male and as "Father" not only tends to promote and perpetuate patriarchal and hierarchical thinking and androcentrism, but for many brings to mind images of violence, abuse, domination, subjection, and a variety of negative traits associated with many men and fathers. Complicating this reality is the fact that both the Old and New Testaments often seem to portray God in such negative ways at the same time that their language concerning God implies that "he" is male in gender. It seems to me that this is one of the primary reasons why so many Christians have opted for gender-neutral language when speaking of God.

Yet while I agree that it is extremely problematic to conceive of God as a male who displays such negative traits, by refraining from speaking of God with masculine pronouns on that basis, do we not actually encourage *even more* the idea that to be male and to be a father is by nature and by definition to be violent, abusive, and domineering, since that is the basis upon which we are justifying the avoidance of masculine pronouns when speaking of God? And in that case, as a Christian man and father, must I suppress my gender identity in order to be "Godlike," "neutering" *myself* as I "neuter" *God* by the way I speak of God? In addition, the fact that there are women as well as men who are violent, abusive, and domineering means that, in itself, using gender-neutral language for God in order to insist that "God is not male" does not necessarily involve affirming a God who is not violent, abusive, and domineering. In my mind, language for God that avoids ascribing gender to God does in fact help to avoid such characterizations of God, but it does so precisely because those are traits that we ascribe primarily to *persons*. Thus we end up

depersonalizing God once more to turn God into the type of remote, nebulous, and faceless being I have described above, a being who also then tends to be viewed as impassive, emotionless, indifferent, and distant. I would stress once more, then, that what we gain by speaking of God as a being without gender is outweighed by what we lose, namely, the stress on God's personhood that gendered language provides.

There are, of course, negative traits and stereotypes that in our culture are commonly associated with being female as well, and we must therefore recognize that to speak of God using feminine pronouns is by no means without its own risks and pitfalls. Nevertheless, just as we must insist that when we refer to God with masculine pronouns, we wish to ascribe to God only the *positive* traits commonly associated with masculinity and not the *negative* ones, while at the same subverting the idea that certain traits are by definition only masculine and not feminine, so also must we insist that, when using feminine pronouns to speak of God, our intention is not only to ascribe to God the *positive* traits commonly associated with femininity without affirming the *negative* ones, but also to call into question the cultural assumptions according to which certain traits are by nature and definition feminine and not masculine.

The reasons why I believe that it is preferable to use both masculine and feminine pronouns to refer to God rather than avoiding the use of gendered pronouns when speaking of God can also be made evident by considering several of the 94 Theses that I published online on October 31, 2017 in order to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the publication of Martin Luther's 95 Theses in 1517.[22] While in many of those theses I did refrain from using either masculine or feminine pronouns to refer to God in the third person, in others I did not. Below are some of the theses in which I did not. After citing each one, I will restate it using the gender-neutral language for God that is common in many circles today:

8. God commands that we obey her for our own sakes.

   vs.

8. God commands that we obey God for our own sakes.

24. For God to have intervened to save Jesus from being crucified by taking him up into heaven before that could happen would have been tantamount to God saying to the world, "I love you all very much and I want you to love one another, but when your activity on behalf of others leads to the threat of suffering and death at the hands of others, then stop immediately what you are doing and run as fast as you can to a safe place where you can hide out permanently so that no one can ever bother you again." From my perspective, a God who really loves us could never ever say such a thing. If God's love for us only goes so far, then how can God expect our love to go any further than his?

    vs. the final phrase:

    If God's love for us only goes so far, then how can God expect our love to go any further than God's?

30. After Jesus had offered up his life to God and been raised so that he might continue to be Lord and servant of all in a new and different way, his first followers concluded, "In this man, God has not only given us new revelations, commandments, prophecies, or hopes. God has gone so far as to give us his very self!"

    vs. the final phrase:

    "God has gone so far as to give us God's very self!"

47. Faith saves, not because God has arbitrarily established the acceptance of certain doctrines as the condition for saving people, but because it involves entrusting one's life entirely to God

[22] See https://94t.mx/94-theses/, already referenced above.

and looking to God above all else for the help one needs. Nothing makes us whole but faith, which involves constantly fixing our gaze on God rather than on ourselves. God therefore commands us to believe in him for our own good.

vs. the final phrase:

God therefore commands us to believe in God for our own good.

75. The reason that Lutherans do not pray to the saints is that we believe in a God who loves us so much that she wants us to approach her directly through Jesus.

vs.

75. The reason that Lutherans do not pray to the saints is that we believe in a God who loves us so much that God wants us to approach God directly through Jesus.

87. It is not bad or sinful to doubt God, question God, or get angry at God. On the contrary, God wants us do these things when we feel moved to do so. In reality, God is overjoyed when someone yells at him, "I don't believe in you!" He responds: "I am so glad that we're finally having this conversation! Let's go get a cup of coffee and keep chatting."

vs. the final half of the thesis:

In reality, God is overjoyed when someone yells at God, "I don't believe in you!" God responds: "I am so glad that we're finally having this conversation! Let's go get a cup of coffee and keep chatting."

92. The reason why we cannot merit God's grace, favor, and love is that these things are already ours in abundance. How can we merit or earn something that we have already been given freely? If God already loves us infinitely by pure grace just as we are, how can our behavior bring her to love us more? The only thing that our behavior can merit is a particular form that God's love for us will take. God responds to our behavior by using many different means to attempt to mold us into the persons she wants us to be for our own good and that of others.

vs. the third and final sentences:

If God already loves us infinitely by pure grace just as we are, how can our behavior bring God to love us more?... God responds to our behavior by using many different means to attempt to mold us into the persons God wants us to be for our own good and that of others.

94. All of the ideas I have shared here have been repeated many times by others long before me. All that I have done is to dress them up in some fancy clothes that will cause people to stare for a few moments before deciding whether or not to shop for the same brand or even design their own label. If that makes you chuckle, stop it. None of these things are laughing matters. One way or another, I just want to make you cry with me so that you will ask God for a handkerchief and start wiping away the tears. Then we can all dance to the music that God has been dying to play for us on his fiddle.

vs. the final sentence of the thesis:

Then we can all dance to the music that God has been dying to play for us on God's fiddle.

In most of the theses just cited, it should be evident that to have avoided using gendered pronouns to refer to God would have made the imagery bland, impersonal, abstract, and perhaps even dull. In several of these theses, most notably 24, 30, 47, and especially 75, refraining from using a gendered personal pronoun also gives the impression that, each time it is used, the word "God" refers to some other, different God, rather than the same God *himself* or *herself*. Obviously, in several of these theses, I could probably have figured out some circumlocution to avoid having to use a personal pronoun to refer to God, yet once again this would have weakened the impact considerably and required even more words.

It may also be helpful to consider the reasons why I chose to use either male or female personal pronouns in a number of these theses. In the case

of thesis 8, for example, "God commands that we obey her for our own sakes," I used the feminine pronoun because the emphasis is on God's authority, and I wished to stress that being an authority figure is something that can and should characterize not only males, as our culture often presupposes, but females as well. It is important for *women* to be seen as possessing the same authority as men, and the gender of those in positions of authority should not affect the way we view them and their authority. Because giving commandments is commonly seen as an act of imposition and compulsion—an idea I wanted to question in this thesis—, and because imposition and compulsion are generally considered something that males do through the use of force and power, I also thought that to affirm, "God commands that we obey *him* for our own sakes" might reinforce the idea of a domineering, overpowering male God that many people associate with the God of Scripture. Thesis 75, which speaks of us approaching God "directly through Jesus," also conveys the idea of God's sovereignty and authority over all, and therefore for the same reasons just mentioned I chose to speak of approaching "her" rather than "him."

In theses 87, 92, and 94, I wanted to stress once more the idea that God is a *person*: someone we can yell at and chat with over a cup of coffee (87), someone who "loves us infinitely by pure grace" and wants to "mold" us like a potter molds clay (92), and someone who plays "his" own fiddle (94). Because thesis 87 speaks of yelling at God, I thought it was better to use a masculine pronoun there. In our culture, it is considered more acceptable to yell at men than women, in large part because people are especially sensitive to any forms of violence against women, whether physical, verbal, or of some other type. Thus I thought the image of yelling at God as a man was preferable, since readers could relate more easily to that image and identify with it more. For me to convey the idea of yelling at a woman might also be seen as promoting violence or abuse of the type that men often practice toward women. Furthermore, since women are commonly stereotyped as persons who love to sit down to chat and gossip for hours on end, often over a cup of coffee, representing God as male here avoids reinforcing such a stereotype.

Because I wished to stress the tender, gracious, caressing love of God in thesis 92, I thought that the image of God as female and motherly would have a stronger impact on the reader, even though this might be seen as falling into a stereotype of women that I have already questioned above. I felt that this potential difficulty was offset, however, by presenting God as a female potter, both because crafting and molding things is often associated with masculinity rather than femininity—something I wanted to question—but also because, for better or for worse, we generally think of women doing pottery at home as a hobby simply for pleasure's sake, whereas we tend to conceive of men doing pottery in a factory or workplace in a way that is tedious and monotonous, not because they enjoy it but simply because they need to make a living. I wanted to present a loving God who takes great delight in molding and shaping us and does so gently and caringly, paying close attention to detail, rather than forcefully, mechanically, and coldly mass-producing the same object over and over again. Therefore, at the risk of promoting stereotypes that I would question, I portrayed God as a woman.

While undoubtedly there are women who play the fiddle just as well and as passionately as men, in thesis 94 I wanted to create in the reader's mind the image of a fiddler such as those who play on porches or dance halls in the deep South of the U.S. or around a campfire in the countrysides of Eastern Europe, egging others on to dance with uncontrollable gaiety and glee to the tunes they improvise as they twist their torsos back and forth, stamp their foot to the beat of their rapturous,

mesmerizing melodies, and gaze on those dancing with a glimmer in their eyes, a grin of unrepressed joy across their face, and raucous shouts of merriment and revelry. Because the only fiddlers I have seen do this are men, I decided to depict God as male in this case. In passing, I would add that this final image says quite a bit about the kind of God in whom I believe, although the previous ones do as well.

In my theses, therefore, I sought not only to alternate between the use of masculine and feminine pronouns to refer to God in the third person in order to promote gender equity, but also reflected carefully on which of the two options best served to communicate the imagery I wanted to create in the readers' mind. While it is important to keep a balance between the two, I believe it is also important to pick and choose which option is best suited to portraying the concept of God that one wishes to convey in a particular context.

In principle, of course, in many of these theses I might have used the forms of "they" or "ze" to refer to God. From my perspective, however, to have done so would also have made those theses less powerful and impacting, in addition to making them sound odd to most English-speakers who are not accustomed to the use of these pronouns. This becomes evident by considering the following possibilities:

8. God commands that we obey her for our own sakes.

vs.

8. God commands that we obey them for our own sakes.

vs.

8. God commands that we obey zir for our own sakes.

24. ... If God's love for us only goes so far, then how can God expect our love to go any further than his?

vs.

24. ... If God's love for us only goes so far, then how can God expect our love to go any further than theirs?

vs.

24. ... If God's love for us only goes so far, then how can God expect our love to go any further than zirs?

47. ... God therefore commands us to believe in him for our own good.

vs.

47. ... God therefore commands us to believe in them for our own good.

vs.

47. ... God therefore commands us to believe in zir for our own good.

75. The reason that Lutherans do not pray to the saints is that we believe in a God who loves us so much that she wants us to approach her directly through Jesus.

vs.

75. The reason that Lutherans do not pray to the saints is that we believe in a God who loves us so much that they want us to approach them directly through Jesus.

vs.

75. The reason that Lutherans do not pray to the saints is that we believe in a God who loves us so much that ze wants us to approach zir directly through Jesus.

These examples should suffice to demonstrate that the practice of using gendered pronouns to refer to God still tends to be much more powerful and impacting than the use of non-gendered pronouns, though as mentioned above, at some point this may change as people become more used to hearing and using non-gendered pronouns.

Using Gender-Inclusive Language for God When Reading Biblical Texts

When considering the use of gender-inclusive language for God, it is important to note that in many contexts when we speak of God we are referring to *conceptions* of God rather than the divine being and living person we call "God." For example, if I am discussing the beliefs that people have about God, when I use the word "God" I am referring to God *as those people conceive of God*. In the context of such a discussion, it would not be appropriate to use feminine language and pronouns to refer to God if such a usage would not reflect faithfully and accurately the conception of God that those people have. Thus it would not be proper to affirm that "when conservative evangelical Christians pray to God, they ask her to bless them," since most of those Christians pray to a God whom they view as masculine rather than feminine and would not speak of that God as a "she" but only as a "he." The same is true if I am speaking of the God of Israel, the God of Jesus and Paul, or the God of Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation.

This point must be taken into account when considering the God of whom we read in the biblical texts. Because those who composed those texts used masculine language and pronouns when speaking of the God in whom they believed, there is a sense in which the use of feminine language and pronouns when attempting to represent accurately their beliefs about that God would be improper. To use feminine language and pronouns when referring to that God would involve ascribing to those who composed the biblical texts a conception of God that was foreign to them. On this basis, it would need to be considered inappropriate to change the masculine personal pronouns used for God in the biblical texts to feminine pronouns. When citing the opening verses of Psalm 23, for example, it would not be faithful to the original intention of the Psalmist to affirm regarding God: "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. She makes me lie down in green pastures; she leads me beside still waters; she restores my soul. She leads me in right paths for her name's sake." The use of feminine pronouns to refer to "the LORD" here, of course, also comes across as extremely odd.

The situation changes, however, when we are using the biblical texts to refer to the God in whom we believe today. Even though the authors of the biblical texts conceived of God as male and thus spoke of him in those terms, we may make a distinction between *their* manner of conceiving of God and speaking of that God and *our* manner of conceiving and speaking of God in our contemporary contexts and modern world. To say that today we speak of that God and conceive of that God in ways that are different from the ways in which the biblical writers spoke and conceived of God is not necessarily to affirm that we now believe in a God who is *distinct* from that God or who is no longer the same God. Rather, we might say that the form in which we view and experience the same God of whom the authors of the biblical texts wrote is in some ways different from the forms in which they viewed and experienced that God in their own day, just as the form in which we view and experience the world around us is in some ways very different from the form in which they did.

In that case, we may indeed regard it as proper and appropriate to use feminine language and pronouns to refer to the God of Scripture when reading those texts and commenting on them. When we recite Psalm 23, therefore, we may choose to say of the God of whom that Psalm speaks: "She makes me lie down in green pastures; she leads me beside still waters; she restores my soul. She leads me in right paths for her name's sake." Even if the author of that Psalm did not conceive or speak of God in that way, we may certainly do so ourselves if such a translation

reflects our own understanding or experience of God, and in that case it would be good, right, and proper to use feminine personal pronouns rather than masculine pronouns when reciting those verses from the Psalm and reading other biblical texts as well.

Of course, many people would argue that once we begin to use feminine language and pronouns to refer to the God of the Bible, we are no longer speaking of the same God but have replaced him with a different God. I would argue, however, that such is not necessarily the case. Even though the biblical texts consistently use only masculine pronouns to refer to God and use the masculine forms of adjectives, nouns, and verbs in Hebrew and Greek when mentioning God, they also insist that God is not a man. In my experience, even the most conservative biblical scholars, who under no circumstances would accept departing from the practice of referring to God exclusively with masculine pronouns, would have to acknowledge that the God of Scripture is *not actually male*, or at least that God does not have a man's body with a male anatomy.

If this is the case, to claim that God is male requires that we define God's masculinity or "maleness" in terms that do *not* have to do with physical attributes, anatomy, or appearance. The only way to do this would be to affirm that God *thinks*, *acts*, or *behaves* as a male rather than as a female. Precisely what that might mean is by no means clear. The Bible represents God as thinking, acting, and behaving as a *person*, but not necessarily as a *male* person. Undoubtedly, attributes and imagery that were and are commonly associated with males rather than females are often used when speaking of God, yet the same is true of attributes and imagery commonly associated with females rather than males. Furthermore, we must recognize that when the Bible speaks of God as Father, King, Lord, or in other ways that represent "him" as male, it is using language that is not only anthropomorphic but *metaphorical* as well. In other words, in the strict sense of the word, God is not *really* a father—either in relation to Christ or to us as human beings—because neither Christ nor we are the product of an act of sexual procreation with a female on God's part. Nor is God actually a king or lord. While God is no doubt portrayed as a king and a lord in Scripture, that imagery and language must be seen as representing emblematic figures of speech that compare and contrast God with earthly authority figures by means of analogies.

Because the language and imagery used to refer to God is both anthropomorphic and metaphorical, it can be argued that there is no reason why we might not at times use feminine pronouns when translating into English the masculine pronouns used in Hebrew and Greek to refer to God. In fact, once we identify God's Spirit with God's own being or nature, as trinitarian theology does, we must acknowledge that there is precedence for changing God's gender in virtually all of the traditional English translations of the Bible, not only because they use masculine rather than feminine pronouns when alluding to God's *ruach* (Spirit), even though in Hebrew *ruach* is feminine in gender, but also because in English we must choose between masculine and feminine forms when translating the word *pneuma*, which in Greek is *not* masculine in gender but neuter. If we use masculine forms to refer to God's Spirit, whom we also call the "Holy Spirit," even though in Hebrew and Greek that Spirit *is not* male in gender,[23] then

[23] The biblical writers themselves change the gender of the Holy Spirit from neuter to masculine at times, such as in John 16:13-14, where the Evangelist presents Jesus as referring to *to pneuma tēs alētheias* (the Spirit of truth) as *ekeinos* rather than *ekeinon*. It must be remembered, of course, that since Jesus spoke in Aramaic, which also uses the feminine word *ruach* to refer to God's Spirit, in John 16:13-14 the Evangelist is presenting a translation of the words he

why can we not use feminine forms to refer not only to God's Spirit but to God "herself," even though in biblical Hebrew and Greek God *is not* female in gender?

If we do so, we are certainly not being unfaithful to the biblical texts, which ascribe to God attributes that are by no means exclusive to males, such as love, joy, anger, and sadness. In fact, if we do associate one gender in particular with certain attributes of God, we must recognize that there are other attributes ascribed to God in Scripture that we commonly associate with the *other* gender. It could therefore even be argued that, if we wish to be faithful to the "original meanings" of the texts as those meanings are reconstructed by biblical scholars and translators, there are passages in which allusions to God in the third person might be better translated into English with feminine rather than masculine pronouns, since at times God acts as a *woman* and is said to do things that only *women* do—even giving birth from a womb (James 1:18). Such is the literal meaning of the verb *apokuein* used of God in this verse,[24] which states: "In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave birth to us by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures." Would it not be more appropriate to translate this verse: "In fulfillment of her own purpose she gave birth to us by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of her creatures"?

Furthermore, it must be remembered that because no translation can capture and convey fully and perfectly the original meaning of any text, every translation represents faithfully only certain aspects of that original meaning, while failing to represent faithfully *other* aspects. The example I like to use with my students to demonstrate this truth is the question of how the Hebrew word *shalom* should be translated into English in a passage such as the Aaronic benediction in Num 6:24-26. Usually the last phrase of this benediction, which ends with the word *shalom*, is translated in terms of God giving "peace" to those upon whom the blessing is pronounced. As biblical scholars know very well, however, in Hebrew *shalom* means much more than "peace." According to Old Testament scholar George Knight, "The verbal root from which it derives conveys the conception of being whole or being complete or sound; consequently the transitive form of the verb [*shalam*] means to make whole, to restore, to complete." Knight stresses that *shalom* thus involves a total well-being in body, mind, and soul and embraces concepts such as abundance, prosperity, material security, tranquility, contentment, and "the right relations which can ideally obtain amongst men [and women] living together in harmony"; "fulness of life, harmony, satisfaction, completion, integrity—all these English words together are required to express the Hebrew noun—both in [a people's] communal life and in the life of individual men and women."[25]

If this is the case, how should we translate *shalom* in passages such as Num 6:26? To translate it simply as "peace" certainly does not do justice to the original meaning of the text. To opt exclusively for one of the other terms proposed here by Knight would also involve capturing only part of the text's original meaning and failing to capture and convey faithfully and adequately other parts. We could, of course, translate *shalom* with 10 or 15 words on the basis of Knight's observation, yet this would make for a very long and overbearing

attributes to Jesus rather than his *ipsissima verba*. This suggests that even Jesus himself may have changed the Spirit's gender when speaking of "her."

[24] This verb is formed from the preposition *apo*, "from," and *kuein*, "to bear in the womb."

[25] George A. F. Knight, *A Christian Theology of the Old Testament* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1959), 250, 253.

benediction, and even that amount of words would be insufficient to represent fully what the text originally meant and might mean in English today.

On this same basis, it might be concluded that to refer to God exclusively with masculine pronouns when translating Scripture into English is to fail to represent faithfully the original meaning of many of the biblical texts. The language the Bible uses for God is not *andromorphic* but *anthropomorphic*. Like the Latin word *homo,* the German word *Mensch*, and the Slovak word *človek*, the Greek word *anthropos* is masculine in gender but can be used to refer to a female as well as a male. These languages all contain words for "man" in the sense of "male" as distinguished from "female" (Latin *vir*, German *Mann*, Slovak *muž*, and Greek *anēr*, which when declined takes forms beginning with *andr-*). In English, the word "man" originally could also be used for both a male and a female. When the New Testament speaks of "all men" in the sense of "all people," it uses the noun *anthrōpos* (*pantes hoi anthrōpoi*) and has in mind women as well as men. Similarly, even though Greek had a female form of "god" to refer to a goddess (*thea*), when the Greeks spoke of "the gods" using the plural form of *theos* (*hoi theoi*), they were generally referring to both male and female gods. In fact, like *anthrōpos*, the Greek word *theos* in the singular was at times used to refer to a god who was female—that is, a goddess.

Thus, because words that are masculine in gender in both biblical Hebrew and Greek could be used to speak of females as well as males, especially when used in the plural, but at times also in the singular, the fact that the word "God" is masculine in gender in the biblical languages should not be seen as an impediment to referring to God with feminine pronouns in English and using "she" as well as "he" when alluding to God. When the Bible uses anthropomorphic language to speak of God, it does so to refer to God as a *person* or *human being* (*anthrōpos*), but not specifically a *male* person or human being (*anēr*). And just as in English we have for the most part abandoned the usage of the masculine *nouns* "man" and "men" to refer to females as well as males, even though this was up until recent times widely accepted as standard English, so also has it become common to abandon the exclusive use of masculine *pronouns* to refer to both males and females in sentences such as: "every person should see his dentist regularly," or: "a person should know what he is doing before he starts something new." Previously, sentences such as these were considered *correct* in standard English, whereas it was considered *incorrect* to say that "every person should see her dentist regularly" and that "a person should know what she is doing before she starts something new." Such a usage, however, is now quite common and considered correct, as is the practice of alternating between the use of feminine and masculine pronouns in such cases rather than using one or the other exclusively.

Therefore, to insist on the exclusive use of masculine pronouns to refer to God in English translations of Scripture may be seen as limiting the original meanings of the biblical texts in ways that those who composed, read, and heard them did not. What the Bible continually stresses when it speaks of God with masculine pronouns is not that God is a *male*, but that God is a *person*. This means that we do not adequately or accurately capture the original meaning of the biblical allusions to God in their fullness or represent faithfully the thought of the authors of Scripture when in our modern English translations we refuse to use feminine pronouns and insist on using only masculine pronouns in English when speaking of God, since in modern English the masculine pronouns used to refer to God in English translations of the Bible are now used exclusively for males but no longer for females as well. Such a practice places limitations and restrictions on the meaning of the biblical texts that

do not exist in the languages in which they were written. While the use of masculine pronouns in English translations of the biblical passages that allude to God in the third person brings out certain aspects of the original meaning of those passages that the use of feminine pronouns does not, at the same time the exclusive use of masculine pronouns fails to bring out other aspects of the original meaning of those passages that the use of feminine pronouns at times would convey better or more faithfully. This means that, in order to capture fully the meaning of those passages, it would be preferable to use both masculine and feminine pronouns to speak of God in English, just as to capture more fully and adequately the meaning of the word *shalom* in Hebrew, we must use a variety of words rather than a single word by itself, such as "peace."

Because every translation is always an approximation, capturing some aspects of the original meaning of a text while at the same time failing to capture others, one could rightly argue that it is not only good and proper but *at times even necessary* to translate the beginning of John 3:16 as: "For God so loved the world that she gave her only-begotten Son." Such a translation conveys certain truths about the God of Jesus and the Fourth Evangelist that the conventional translations that use masculine pronouns do not. Personally, in fact, I think that such a translation of John 3:16 is not only accurate and correct in many ways but also extremely beautiful and moving. It creates in my mind an image of God that in certain regards is extremely faithful to the thought of the author of the Gospel and can be said to represent even more clearly some of the things he sought to communicate about the God of whom he spoke, even though it undoubtedly fails to communicate other aspects of his thought that the use of masculine pronouns *does* communicate. In particular, in my mind, the imagery of a *mother* giving up her son stresses even more strongly and powerfully the enormity of God's love for the world than that of a *father* giving up his son—which is precisely what the Evangelist *wanted* to stress—even though the latter image is also extremely powerful and reflects certain aspects of the Evangelist's thought more clearly than the first image. On this basis, we might conclude that we need to use *both* masculine *and* feminine pronouns if we wish to translate the first phrase of John 3:16 accurately and capture its meaning more fully.

Obviously, when reading or citing a biblical text, if one chooses to use gendered pronouns rather than non-gendered pronouns such as "they" or "ze," one cannot use pronouns of both masculine and feminine gender at the same time but must opt for one or the other in each context. It would hardly be acceptable to translate John 3:16, for example, as: "For God so loved the world that she gave his only-begotten Son." In different contexts, therefore, those reading or citing Scripture would need to decide which gendered pronoun to use for God, depending on what they wish to convey regarding the God of Scripture in each particular context.

Printed versions of the biblical texts might even give readers the option of using either masculine or feminine pronouns or non-gendered pronouns by replacing the masculine pronouns that appear in traditional versions of the biblical texts by some sign or symbol that indicates that the reader is free to use whatever gendered or non-gendered pronouns that they prefer. In that case, a person reading a passage from Scripture in a worship service or some other context in which people are reading Scripture together would have the option of choosing which set of pronouns to use. It would be necessary, however, to agree on the sign or symbol used, and it would no doubt be necessary for readers to become accustomed to this practice so as to feel comfortable and become fluent when reading from Scripture in this way. It might also be helpful to use different signs or symbols depending on whether the pronoun is used as a

subject, an object, or in a possessive form. Biblical texts might also be printed using the different forms of a non-gendered pronoun such as "ze," yet in that case readers might be instructed that they are free to alter the gender of the pronoun as they see fit.

Of course, when reading passages from the Scriptures that use metaphors such as "King," "Father," and "Husband" to refer to God, it would probably be necessary and preferable to continue to use masculine pronouns in those contexts. Even if one opted for non-gendered pronouns, the imagery that would come across to the readers would still be that of a male figure. In principle, however, when the imagery used for God as a parent figure does not attribute to him traits that are particularly masculine in nature, one might replace "Father" with "Mother." This might be appropriate in a passage such as Jer 31:9, for example, where God is presented as affirming:

> With weeping they shall come,
> and with consolations I will lead them back;
> I will let them walk by brooks of water,
> in a straight path where they shall not stumble,
> for I have become a Mother to Israel,
> and Ephraim is my firstborn.

Although the allusion to God as "Mother" might come across as odd in contexts in which God is also referred to as "Lord" or "LORD," many might nevertheless find such a usage acceptable in a passage such as Isa 64:8:

> Yet, O LORD, you are our Mother;
> we are the clay, and you are our potter;
> we are all the work of your hand.

It must be recognized, however, that in many passages from both the Old and New Testaments, the practice of replacing "Father" with "Mother" would lead to translations that most people would find extremely odd. When hearing the Gospels read, for example, most Christians today would find it extremely difficult to get used to hearing Jesus speak of God as his Mother rather than his Father or refer to God as "heavenly Mother" rather than "heavenly Father." For that reason, it would probably be best to avoid such translations, at least for the time being.

When reading passages from the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament in particular, of course, the greatest obstacle to using feminine personal pronouns to refer to God is the extensive use of the term "LORD" to translate YHWH. While in principle English translations might revert to the use of YHWH or Yahweh rather than substituting "LORD" for God's name in Hebrew, in light of the fact that YHWH was consistently viewed as male rather than female when the biblical texts were composed, most readers would find it odd to hear feminine personal pronouns used to refer to YHWH, just as they would consider it strange to hear of "the LORD" spoken of as female. An additional problem is that biblical scholars are not entirely certain that God's name was pronounced as "Yahweh" in ancient Israel.[26] Of course, one might simply use "God" rather than "LORD" when translating YHWH or even substitute some other title for "LORD" that might be modified with both masculine and feminine pronouns as well as non-gendered personal pronouns. Thus, for example, YHWH could be replaced with something such as "the Almighty," "the Holy One," "the Creator," or "the Redeemer," yet such titles tend to stress one particular aspect of God in a way that the use of YHWH and "LORD" do not. One might also follow Jewish practice by referring to God as "the Name" or *Hashem*, though this might be regarded as depersonalizing God, as if he were a name rather than a person. Proposals such as these must be regarded as problematic for a number of reasons, yet it is important to stress once more that the use

[26] On this point, see especially Thomas Römer, *The Invention of God*, trans. Raymond Geuss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 28-32.

of YHWH, Yahweh, or LORD in English translations is problematic as well.

Making a Decision When to Use Inclusive Language for God

While there are very good reasons to implement and promote the use of gender-inclusive language for God among Christians today, it must be recognized that a great deal of work must be done before such a practice can hope to gain widespread acceptance. The vast majority of Christians today would react negatively to the use of pronouns such as "they," "ze," and "she" to refer to God. Even those who in principle would be open to the use of such language for God would find it odd and probably have considerable difficulties adapting to it. In my own experience, simply to begin speaking of God in this manner without explaining and justifying one's reasons for doing so and allowing people to grow accustomed to such a usage tends either to alienate people or else to come across as so strange that the hearers or readers are unable to focus on what one is actually wishing to say regarding God, since they end up paying attention to nothing else but the manner in which one is using feminine or non-gendered pronouns to refer to God in a way that they find surprising and exotic.

For that reason, in my own writing, I have generally continued to follow tradition in using masculine pronouns to refer to God, especially when working in the area of biblical and historical studies, where the questions addressed have to do with the beliefs and conceptions regarding God held by people in the past rather than the manner in which we should conceive and speak of God today. While on occasion I have followed the practice of avoiding the use of pronouns to refer to God in the way that many scholars and publishers prefer, for the most part I have chosen to reject such a practice for the reasons I have mentioned above. In particular, I consider it more important to speak of a deeply personal, intimate, caring, and passionate God who is actively engaged as a person in our lives and our world than to avoid the use of masculine pronouns for God that tend to promote gender inequity. While I consider it extremely important to promote gender equity and inclusivity, I would prefer to do so by encouraging people to use the type of gender-inclusive language for God I have proposed here rather than by adhering to the use of gender-neutral language for God that from my perspective tends to convert God into a distant, abstract, bland, and impersonal divine being and thereby diminish the power, potency, and impact of the message regarding God that we wish to convey to the world.

I would therefore maintain that what we need today is to generate discussion and dialogue regarding the use of the type of gender-inclusive language for God that I have described here and implement measures aimed at educating people in the use of such language and allowing them to grow accustomed to it until they no longer find it strange and exotic. To some extent, of course, that will happen naturally as the use of gender-inclusive language and pronouns becomes more common among English speakers in general—assuming, of course, that this will take place over time. However, efforts must continue among Christians to bring people to understand the manner in which the exclusive use of masculine pronouns for God leads to gender inequity and injustice and to promote the use of language regarding God that not only contributes to greater inclusivity and equity but also enables believers to conceive and speak of God in ways that are truly transforming, liberating, and empowering. This will be possible only if we continue to promote and advocate for theological reflection on these issues and implement programs aimed at educating people on the questions and issues involved so as to raise greater awareness and generate greater interest, concern, and passion for gender equity and inclusivity.

At the same time, of course, people can only grow accustomed to the type of gender-inclusive language for God that I have described here and come to accept and use that language if they encounter that language in the contexts in which they hear, speak, and read about God. For that reason, it is also important to identify spaces and contexts in which we may increasingly make use of such language at the same time that we strive to accustom people to hearing that language and educate them regarding its usage. While this undoubtedly involves a process that requires time and patience in order to be effective and successful, it is also important not to delay the process simply because some people will find it bothersome or be opposed to it.

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In conclusion, I would insist on three points. First, whatever answers are given to the questions and problems raised by the use of gendered, non-gendered, gender-neutral, or gender-inclusive language to refer to God, it is important that we keep this issue at the fore and continue to discuss it and reflect on it extensively. Only in this way can we address the important issues involved, grow in our awareness of those issues, and become more sensitive to them. As we do so, we will be empowered to communicate more clearly our faith in God in ways that are truly transforming and liberating and avoid perpretating ideas, conceptions, and imagery regarding God that we regard as oppressive and unjust to the extent that we find it possible to do so. Of course, as I have stressed above, no matter what language or imagery we use when speaking about God, that language and imagery will always be problematic in different ways and for different reasons. It is important that people constantly be reminded of this fact.

A second point I would stress is that we must refrain from imposing on others the way of referring to God that each of us has chosen. At the same time, we must not prohibit others from using the language they prefer. I once heard of a female seminary student who was told, "It is best to avoid referring to God as 'Father,' since to do so contributes to patriarchal and hierarchical thinking." The student responded angrily, "I grew up without a father. Do not take away from me the only Father I have ever had!" While it is important that we all share our beliefs with one another, we must avoid pressuring others in any way to adopt those beliefs themselves. Let God be God and touch people's lives as she wishes. Yet for God to do this, we must all be given a chance to share our views on these questions and make the effort to listen to one another.

Third and most importantly, as I have already stressed above, I firmly believe that the primary criterion that should guide our decisions on questions such as those discussed in this article is whether our language conveys as faithfully and powerfully as possible our conviction that the God whom we confess and proclaim is a God of pure, unbounded, and unconditional love and grace who cares deeply for each of us personally and individually, no matter who we are. If in the midst of our discussions regarding how to speak of God we place some other concern above this one, in my opinion, those discussions will end up obscuring the biblical gospel we are called to proclaim rather than promoting it in the way that God desires and intends.

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