

LINGUA FRANKLY—INCLUSIVE AND PERSONAL

by Dr. Ben Witherington

The discussion of the importance of language has in recent years become something of a cause celebre in numerous academic disciplines. When we consider the attention now given in philosophy to linguistic analysis, or the continued detailed discussions in biblical studies on the 'semantics of biblical language' (as James Barr puts it), or the insistence amongst experts in civil law of the need to better define terms, or the now aging dictum of Marshall McLuhan that the 'medium is the message', it is easy to see the pre-occupation with words and their meanings, at least in scholarly circles. This concern, however, is by no means confined to the ivory tower, as the various churches of America have discovered, because we are now also in the midst of revising prayer-books, lectionaries, Bible translations, hymns and statements of faith. There is obviously profound interest in what sort of flesh the Word and the words of the Christian faith ought to be wearing.

Obviously one of the major stimuli to this reevaluation has been the feminist movement within the church, and so in the context of the church the discussion has largely centered on the use of gender specific language both of human beings and of God. This ongoing discussion has been a helpful one and largely a healthy one as words, of course, only have meaning in contexts, and it is ever needful to re-express the truth once given in new ways so that modern people may both hear and heed it in their own context. Since various churches now have new lectionaries that are the product of such reflection, it would be useful to do some theological stock-taking on this whole matter, before we also have various new hymnals and Bible translations.

I remember a conversation I once had with Dr. Bruce Metzger at Princeton, then chairman of the RSV translation committee. He stressed, as I remember, the need to avoid rewriting history, but at the same time the need for inclusive language in the human discussion. For Metzger this meant that while the RSV would be in the business of using terms like humanity, or people instead of mankind, to translate words that were intended to be gender inclusive, he would not sanction any translation of references to the deity, or to Jesus or even to humans that did not reflect what the original author intended to say. In short, there was to be no translation that was not faithful to the intent of the author - however patriarchal his own language might be. Behind this view their seemed to be the axioms that a) to de-sexualize the language was to

denude it of some of its personal content; and b) to change the language amounted to an attempt to change the concepts the author meant to convey (however misguided some might think him to be). This amounted to an attempt to rewrite or even censor history. It did not merely amount to an attempt to translate biblical ideas into good modern English, so that those ideas might be heard and considered. It is entirely possible that I have read more into my conversation with Dr. Metzger than it warranted, and if so I and not he should be faulted for any errors in the explanation above. However, if what has been said has any merit, then it leads to some important conclusions.

Firstly in regard to the matter of sexual language, several important things need to be asked. Is it necessarily the case that the use of sexual language to refer to deity or humanity is necessarily sexist (by which I mean showing sexual prejudice or bias)? This question I address especially to those who insist that we must use language such as creator, redeemer, sustainer, rather than Father, Son, Spirit, or chairperson rather than chairman or chairwoman. Is the problem here with the use of gender language *altogether*, or rather the use of exclusively male gender language to refer to deity and humanity? If it is the latter then the problem is not with sexual language per se.

To pursue this a bit further, does not the failure to use sexual language of humanity or deity tend to depersonalize that language? Yet one would think that it is crucial that biblical people convey the message that God is a personal being, as we are. If there is anyone who should be opposed to the depersonalization of our world, it surely ought to be those who profess allegiance to a biblical heritage. What does it mean to be created in the image of God (both male and female equally so) if it does not at least entail the capacity for deeply personal relationships of love both with our God and with each other? I suspect that at the root of some of the drive for depersonalized language in religious contexts is a faulty theological anthropology.

By this I mean, it seems to be assumed that sexuality is not an essential and significant part of our personhood. To put it another way, it is assumed that humanity can be defined adequately quite apart from its sexuality. I suspect that this is an overreaction to gender stereotyping, and as such needs to be brought back in line with a more biblical view of human sexuality, and also of human beings as psychosomatic wholes. Whether we are happy with the fact or not, we are not persons apart from our sexual identity because our sexual makeup is part of that identity. It does not follow from this that there must be some rigid stereotyping of roles. But there must be respect for, expression of, and not denial of our sexual makeup. The equality of men and women in Christ does

not lie in the fact that they are exactly the same in all regards, but that they are equally created in God's image. If there is anything to be deduced from the Genesis stories about male and female it is that they are equal to but not exact duplicates of one another. The complementary nature of male and female is, of course, most evident in the area of sexual sharing, and any attempt to belittle or deny this inherently complementary structure to human sexuality will lead not to a more egalitarian view of marriage, but to a trivializing of any such egalitarian view. People who are equals can accept each other's differences and even appreciate them. The balancing act that we must be engaged in is neither to slight the equality in all that means (equality in marriage, ministry, work) nor to deny the differences.

This task must also be reflected in our use of language in Church contexts. If a woman chairs a committee then by all means let her be called a chairwoman - not a chairperson. Similarly with a man. Again, if we are translating a Bible verse, or writing Sunday school literature, or even praying a prayer when we refer to a mixed group of men and women, let us call them humanity, or human beings, not mankind. Inclusive language should entail the avoidance of gender specific language when we do not have a gender specific group. Surely this is simply a matter of fairness, and should be implied in any commitment to inclusive language. But a commitment to fairness and inclusive language does not need to entail a commitment to depersonalized language. I fear that the use of depersonalized language in religious contexts will only continue to trivialize the importance of human sexuality for human personality, and in the end will do no service to the cause of true equality in all the spheres that men and women both rightly belong - whether in ministry, or in marriage, or elsewhere.

This leads me to a few reflections on the use of inclusive and personal language of the deity or the Christ. Here the same concerns apply. Sexual language is the most personal language we have to speak of human personalities. Certainly it is the position of the Christian faith that God is the ultimate person - from whom all persons and personhood comes. It would be a mistake to use language of God that suggests that the Deity is somehow less than personal. Whether one calls God Father or Mother or both, any of these options are infinitely more personal and therefore more preferable than Creator, Sustainer, etc. God is supremely to be identified as a person, not merely as a fulfiller of some role (whether it be creating, redeeming, etc.). His personhood logically and theologically precedes his activity. The often maintained objection that using sexual language of God may be dangerous and lead people to think of God as a sexual being (a male or female specifically) seems

to me to be based on an unwarranted fear. I can think of no one who as an adult actually concludes God is a male simply because Jesus taught us to call him Abba, Father.

Some scholars at this point have wanted to add certain reservations about calling God Mother, not because they are sexists, but for serious theological reasons. There is, for instance, the fact that, at least according to Christian tradition in the birth narratives, Jesus had an earthly mother but no earthly father. Because of this many have argued that it may even be inappropriate to call God Mother precisely because it would have been both inappropriate and misleading for Jesus to do so. It might also amount to a trivialization of the role of one of the most important of female figures in the Bible - Mary. Not only because of concerns about ecumenical relations, if Mary's role is neglected or dismissed, but also because Jesus gave us a precedent of modeling our prayer life on his and calling God Abba, many who are committed to inclusive and personal language (such as myself) have demurred from breaking with 2,000 years of Church practice at this point. It seems there is more to be lost than gained by such a break. In regard to calling the Holy Spirit a she, there seems to be no theological reason why this could not be done and be theologically proper. Some, however, have been hesitant on this point precisely because one of the early and heretical misperceptions about the Trinity was that it involved God the Father, Jesus the Son, and a Heavenly mother. The concept of a Holy Family in heaven, and thus tri-theism, not monotheism, was a charge Christians had to defend themselves against at various points.

Finally there is the matter of how Jesus is referred to. Some are objecting to calling him Lord, or at least calling God Lord. Jesus was in fact a male. His humanity was real and included masculine gender. For this reason alone there should be no hesitation to use such language of Jesus. Unless one holds to some sort of docetic Christology, that suggests that Jesus was not truly human, or truly male, there should be no problem with the use of such language of the Son. Using it of God, however, is a different matter. For those who object to the use of gender language of God altogether, this usage will also be found unacceptable. However, if in principle one has no problems with the use of gender language of God (whether male or female) the term Lord should not cause difficulties, anymore than King or other gender terms.

It appears then that Shakespeare was not quite right when he suggested that a rose by any other name would still be the same rose, at least when we were talking about transcendent realities. Precisely because God is invisible and not subject to empirical analysis like a rose, there is always a danger of our recreating the Deity in our own image. This is equally

a danger for those who oppose or favor the use of gender language of God. It is my hope that as we put together new hymnals, and lectionaries, and translations, we will heed some of Metzger's warnings and not try to rewrite history, or depersonalize God. Our lingua frankly matters - if we would be faithful to the concepts and persons that lie behind biblical language. The cause of the full equality of male and female should entail the use of inclusive language but does not need to depersonalize the Deity, or desexualize humanity in the process. After all it is creation and creature which are being renewed and redeemed, (not replaced with some *tertium quid*) by the work of Christ.