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Editorial

This number of ERT addresses the challenging issue of God's purpose for women in mission in the Church and in the world and the agony of the millions of women, especially in the non-western world, who are marginalised and oppressed. For some evangelicals the debate is limited to the issue of the ordination of women and the man-woman relationship in the exegesis of passages in Genesis and in Paul's letters. However, radical feminist theologies, as with all liberation theologies, are challenging the Church to rethink her traditional hermeneutical methods and to relate the image of women in the Church to their role in society. The issues of the God-given human dignity, self-identity and diversity of roles of women in the decision-making processes go to the heart of the nature of the Gospel of redemption itself. Today the whole Church—Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox—is struggling to correlate the creational issues of subordination and submission with the redemptive issues of freedom, mutuality and equality.

But this is also a frustrating number of ERT. Although it addresses a number of important issues including inclusive language, hermeneutical principles and practices, the role of ordained women in the Church and women as missionaries in social service and the founding and nurturing of churches, space precludes discussion on several other areas of debate. Perhaps our readership would welcome responses to issues including women and the image of God, the analogy of marriage to Christ and the Church, the harmonising of key texts of Scripture, a critique of feminist theologies and the Church as the whole people of God, ordained and lay (if this distinction is valid), as salt and light. Exposure to cases of team ministries being pioneered in some local churches and dioceses/conferences, could be an inspiration for all. A beginning will be made in the next number of ERT, 'The Gospel Witness in the Market Place'. [p. 292](#)

Inclusive Language: Right or Wrong?

Peter Toon

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The well known English Evangelical theologian, Peter Toon, gives a balanced and precise introduction to the issues relating to the use of inclusive language in the liturgies of the Church. He discusses the long term consequences of the use of inclusive language for Godhead, as distinct from its use in human relations.

Twenty years ago in the United States and only ten years ago in the United Kingdom virtually nothing was heard inside the churches concerning the adoption of inclusive language in public worship. Now it is a major and divisive topic.

The reason for wanting non-excluding or inclusive language is that traditional generic language is seen by some as no longer acceptable. That is, the use of the male pronoun and noun understood as meaning both male and female—e.g. 'Dearly beloved brethren', 'honour all men', 'love the brotherhood' and 'mankind'—is viewed as being sexist, reflecting male domination and being hurtful to those who are conscious that male and

female have a common dignity and are truly equal. Many testimonies concerning this felt hurt have been made by women and men over the last decade. We must hear and seek to understand this pain.

IS INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE TO BE ENCOURAGED?

Yes and no! In principle there is nothing wrong with inclusive language and it may be welcomed, for it does make us all conscious of what we claim to believe—that both male and female human beings are made in the image and after the likeness of God and that in Christ female and male have equal access to and standing before the eternal and holy God. However, a real difficulty of bringing in inclusive language is that it can mean the loss of the beauty of language, especially in translations from old texts. Yet much of this can be overcome with skill and patience.

I must say, however, that this practice is wrong if it becomes a dogma or an obsession: that is, if it is implemented in such a way as to eliminate the traditional language where the generic sense is taken for [p. 293](#) granted. Think of all the hymns, devotional classics, and liturgies which make use of the generic principle, using 'he' for 'he/she' and 'man' for 'man and woman.' We cannot cut ourselves off from the treasures of the past for we need their wisdom and inspiration. Thus, perhaps we need to learn to function, and function happily, with both good new liturgies, hymns and devotional books using inclusive language and the older classic ones with their generic language. Surely we do not have to attempt to rewrite the older ones and thereby spoil their quality.

WHO IS CALLING FOR INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE?

I think we all agree that it comes from both women and men who we may call 'active feminists,' and they are supported by what may be termed 'passive egalitarian opinion'. That is, they want the full integrity, value and rights of women to be established in all areas of life. Most feminists hold that what must be first recognised and then removed in order to achieve genuine equality is patriarchy—men ruling society. They hold that God has revealed to the Church through the insights of modern culture that women are the full and true equals of men in all areas of life. Thus, the domination of society, family and church by men must be removed in order for true equality to be possible. Inclusive language in the church services is one way of indicating and moving towards this equality, for it makes women to be recognised as truly there as equals before God in the fellowship and worship of the Church. Women, it is said, are and must be recognised as truly human!

SHOULD INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE APPLY TO THE GODHEAD?

Most 'active feminists' answer 'Yes.' This is because they believe that to use inclusive language for human beings is only the beginning of reform needed. We are all much aware that the contents of the Bible and Christian tradition present the Godhead primarily through masculine names and images: God is 'Lord,' 'Father,' 'King,' 'Bridegroom,' and 'Son' and is a 'He.' Feminists usually explain this dominance of male images of God in terms of the Bible being written by men and thus primarily the record of male experience of God in a male-dominated society. Thus, they go on to insist that it is no good merely achieving inclusive language for humanity, for that will mean [P. 294](#) little in practice if patriarchy is still confirmed and undergirded by the way in which people address God.

Various proposals have been made in order to seek to minimize the dominance of male images for God which remain there within sacred Scripture even after the boldest

attempts to translate the Bible according to inclusivist principles. *One* is to add to the male images some female ones. Thus instead of praying 'Our Father ...' we are asked to pray 'Our Father and our Mother, hallowed be your name.' A *second* is to substitute non-excluding terms for God for the male images. Thus instead of 'Our Father ...' we are asked to pray 'Our Parent ...' and instead of the trinitarian 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit' we are asked to say 'Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier.' A *third approach* is to address God only as 'God' and use images ('Father' in particular) as descriptions of deity rather than names of deity. For example, 'Loving God, mother and father of us all....' This seems to be a subtle way of solving the difficulty for it suggests that there is no qualitative difference between all names, titles, images and descriptions of God found in the Bible. Then, *fourthly* there are all kinds of combinations of these three approaches.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE FOR GOD?

Much is wrong with it, although what is wrong will not be apparent immediately. Where this mixture of male and female images for God is used by a people who have been well schooled in the traditional ways of thinking about God (the one Godhead of Father, Son and Holy Spirit), then it will probably serve as a novelty which may help them affirm the equality of the feminine in humanity. But whether this earthly purpose for the modern way of addressing the eternal, holy God is justifiable is another matter: however, because it is (at best) only playing with words upon the basis of (one hopes) a sure foundation then it will probably (I hope) do little doctrinal and spiritual harm to the people who use such inclusive language for God.

However, where it is taken up by people who have no grounding in traditional Christian doctrine and discourse, then it is sure to become the door into all kinds of errors, problems, misunderstandings and heresies. I am not saying that it will not help to produce religion, perhaps interesting and dynamic religion: rather I am saying that it will help to produce a religion which cannot be called Christianity for it will be so different from that which has been called Christianity for the last 19 centuries. It will have a different doctrine and use different language than traditional, orthodox Christianity. The new religion may [p. 295](#) well be very successful numerically and socially but it will be called by sociologists a sect or a new religious movement.

WILL USE OF FEMININE IMAGES FOR GOD PRODUCE A NEW RELIGION?

The answer is that the name of God is more than a mere name: the name reveals the nature and character of God. 'Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name!' ([Psalm 103](#)). Change the name and you change the nature and character of God. To Moses, God revealed his name as 'LORD' (=Yahweh/Jehovah) and in the New Testament this name is filled out as 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit' (one LORD who is three Persons). Each of the three Persons is 'Lord' and thus the first Christian confession of faith was 'Jesus Christ is Lord.'

Anyone who carefully reads the four Gospels cannot but be impressed by the way in which Jesus is conceived, anointed, filled and guided by the Holy Spirit, and then how he addresses God as 'Father' out of a perfect unity, harmony and communion with Him. As he put it: 'no-one knows the Son except the Father and no-one knows the Father but the Son and any to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' ([Matthew 11:27](#)). In the Gospel of John the community and unity of the Father and the Son is a prominent theme and the Holy Spirit is presented as the One who is sent from the Father through the Son to the disciples.

If, in the face of this testimony, anyone claims and insists that Jesus only used the term 'Father' because it came naturally to him, living in a patriarchal society and thinking in terms of the headship of the father in the family, then she or he needs to realise what his claim implies. It implies that God's self-revelation in Jesus, the Incarnate Word, is seriously flawed since it is culturally conditioned at its very heart, in its very essence, within its centre—in the intimate relationship of Jesus. Son of God in human flesh, with 'God' in heaven. Certainly the apostles took the expressions 'Father' and 'Son' as being revealed by God and spoke of the fullness of time when 'God sent forth his son, born of a woman, born under the law' and of their worshipping 'The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' and being indwelt by the Holy Spirit, 'the Spirit of Christ.'

If we begin to replace the term 'the Father' by 'the Mother' or refer to the first Person as 'Father and Mother' or 'Parent' then we begin to have conceptual problems not only with the relationship of the first and second Persons within the Trinity but also with the Incarnation of the second Person. The classic doctrine of the Trinity is that the Son is p. 296 eternally begotten of the Father (before all ages) and that the Holy Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father through the Son. The important qualifying word is 'eternally,' which not only tells us to reject the concept of the creation of the Son and Spirit by the Father in time but also causes us to interpret 'begets' and 'proceeds' in terms of relationships within a hierarchy of equal Persons.

However, if the first Person is called 'the Mother' then we place ourselves in utter confusion and we have to abandon any doctrine of a Trinity of equal Persons. If we think in terms of 'the Mother' giving birth at a specific time to her 'Son' then this makes 'the Mother' superior to 'the Son' and 'the Son' inferior in origin and time to 'the Mother.' Alternatively, if we think in terms of 'the Mother' eternally giving birth to 'the Son' then we realise that 'the Son' is never sufficiently freed from 'the Mother' in order to be himself, for he is never other than being born! In both cases we also run the risk of having to think of another divine Person to be 'the Father' of 'the Son.' Perhaps this is what modern writers have in mind when they begin prayers 'O God, Father and Mother of us all.' Some priests baptize 'in the name of God, Father, Mother, Son and Spirit.'

Further, we get into problems with the doctrine of creation, being tempted to think of creation, as God bringing forth the world as a woman brings forth her child. To go in this direction is to abandon the biblical teaching of creation *ex nihilo* (from nothing). And such a temptation is not remote, especially with the present emphasis upon the theme of creation in liturgy and the 'goddess' worship that has sprung up as an errant adjunct among members of some Christian churches. For example, 'A Litany of New Birth' begins 'O gracious God of life and birth. How you labour, how you suffer, to bring forth the new creation ...' What is here said of the new creation can easily be transferred to the old creation—and it has been in current trial liturgies in the U.S.

In fact, I doubt whether all those who are pressing for the adoption of inclusive language for deity have truly thought through the implications of what they want to introduce. Their only thoughts seem to be concerned with gaining an equality for the sexes in language for humanity and deity. If they get their way, and they are a very determined minority, there is little chance, as far as I can see, of any coherent doctrine of the Trinity surviving: at best we shall be into some kind of Unitarianism or Arianism where the Son and the Spirit are seen as created beings, rather than eternal, uncreated Persons. Further there is every chance of a repetition of that way of thinking about deity in Baalism which was roundly condemned by the prophets of Israel. A p. 297 minority, but a powerful minority, of those who push for inclusive language are 'monists': They do not believe that God is transcendent but only that he is immanent. God (he/she/it) is identified with the cosmos and so can be 'Earth Mother' or 'Our Father' or 'It'!

Even if we did not have all these theological problems to handle (but let us realise that we do and will have them) we still have the problem that the Bible, the historical liturgies, the vast majority of devotional books and hymns do not contain any examples of God being addressed (in contrast to being described) through feminine images. Though God is likened to a mother or to a mother bird several times in the Bible, God is never called 'Mother.' So in order to bring inclusivity to the sacred Scriptures, the liturgies and devotional books, there is a massive job of revision and excision, rewriting and rephrasing, creating and composing to be done. Or there is a massive job of producing new liturgies, services, hymns and books of prayers which are based wholly on inclusivist principles. Even if there were the people available to do this, can we be sure that there will be any consensus as to what ought to replace that which is being set aside?

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

Not a few women who began by demanding inclusive language for deity have since realised that this cannot be achieved in Christianity, for its holy book, the Bible, is irredeemably patriarchal and Jesus himself accepted and commended a compassionate patriarchy. To rid the Bible of its patriarchy is to have very little of substance left! Thus they have left behind historic, orthodox Christianity in order to create new religions. It does not need much investigation and reflection to reveal that active feminism and historic, authentic Christianity cannot share the same bed: they cannot marry and they will not be fused.

A church which encourages the use of inclusive language for God in its public worship is on the way to becoming a sect, no better or worse than Jehovah's Witnesses or Christian Science. Certainly, the full use of inclusive language for God means a break away from the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church into sectarianism and schism. For a group which cannot wholeheartedly and without inhibition and hesitation pray 'Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name ...' is not a Christian group, however much it is religious and worthy. I believe that committed Christians should graciously but firmly oppose all moves to introduce inclusive language for deity into Christian discourse and worship, and should be careful and cautious even about the use of inclusive language for humanity.

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Inclusive Language in the New Revised Standard Version

Walter Harrelson

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