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Biblical Models for Gender Language in Worship

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A few years ago, I was prompted to think carefully about a biblical policy for inclusive language or, stated differently, a theology of gender language. The title of this paper indicates a narrowing of the scope of such a broad project. Indeed, I have not written a complete theology of the topic. Nor have I addressed all arenas of discourse, such as academic or political. I have chosen, rather, to write about biblical models for gender language *in corporate worship* for three primary reasons. First, most Christians care deeply about worship—about what does or does not happen in corporate worship. Second, I am active in worship ministry, and I regularly make decisions about whether to use, when to use, and how to use gender language in worship. Third, though the NT documents were not primarily worship documents at their creation, they soon became—and remain still—documents central to Christian worship.

A foundational resource for my thinking about this matter is the book *The Promise of the Father: Jesus and God in the New Testament,* by Marianne Meye Thompson, George Eldon Ladd Professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary.[1] Among other valuable insights, Thompson has given her readers a helpful and memorable structure for thinking about egalitarian approaches to the Bible and Christian theology, both broadly and concerning language for God specifically. Early in her book, Thompson describes three approaches: reformist, revolutionary, and rejectionist. To start with the more radical end, rejectionists assert "that the Christian texts and faith are inevitably and intolerably patriarchal"[2] and therefore must be rejected. Revolutionaries, on the other hand, prefer to rethink and restructure Christianity; though the resulting revolution may indeed be radical, Christian texts and their teachings are not rejected entirely. Finally, reformists seek "to conserve what is best in [Christian tradition]." Reformists do not "slavishly imitate" Christian tradition, but "hope for reform in the Church's language for God, arguing that the exclusive use of male imagery does not do justice to the biblical picture of God, yields but limited access to understanding God, and hinders relating to God."[3] These reformists tend "not to discard Father language, but to include a variety of other images as well."[4] In short, rejectionists reject Christianity, revolutionaries tear down and rebuild aspects of Christianity, and reformists salvage and heal aspects of Christianity. Thompson herself advocates for this reformist healing, and she scours scripture to do so.

My own preference would be to nuance Thompson's reformist category by linking it to the idea of restoration. Both ideas have an inherent danger. Reformation is forward-looking and can thus be jarred loose from its intended biblical foundation. Restoration is backward-looking and can thus lead to slavish patternism or to contemporary irrelevance. I am not advocating a rejection of Thompson's reformist category; rather, I want to wed reformation and restoration into a mutually-corrective tandem. And I believe—I hope—that she would

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1. Marianne Meye Thompson, *The Promise of the Father: Jesus and God in the New Testament* (Louisville: WestminsterJohn Knox, 2000).

2. Ibid., 5.

3. Ibid., 3.

4. Ibid.

approve of my efforts. At one point, for example, she substitutes the word *redeem* where the reader might expect *reform*,[5] and *redeem* has both a backward and forward feel. To redeem can be to restore something to what it used to be or always should have been. Indeed, in a quotation of Thompson already given earlier, she states that reformist thinking argues "that the exclusive use of male imagery does not do justice to the biblical picture of God."[6] Thus we need not fear, as one with a rejectionist mindset would, that restoring a biblical picture of God would equal a return to a wholly male picture of God.

I believe it is best to use gender-accurate language in all aspects of corporate worship, including preaching, corporate prayer, and the use of gender-accurate Bible translations (such as the NRSV, NIV 2011, or CEB) when reading scripture in public worship. As I move to the body of the article I will, however, focus my investigation on congregational singing. It is indeed worth considering to what extent, and in what ways, we can reform and restore gender language in our congregational singing—our language for God, for Christ, and for each other.

Referring to God as *Father* (which all NT documents except 3 John do) is the fountainhead for all subsequent masculine terminology for God. Nevertheless, biblical authors do display diversity regarding gender language. I will demonstrate this diversity by looking at four NT documents: the Gospel According to John, the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Epistle of James, and 2 Corinthians. Furthermore, I will suggest these documents as diverse models for gender language in our worship gatherings.

Biblical Models: John

John's gospel refers to God as *Father* about 120 times. This large number stands in stark contrast to Matthew (more than forty times), Luke (about twenty times), and especially Mark, which refers to God as *Father* only four times (8.38, 11.25, 13.32, 14.36).[7] Similarly, John's gospel refers to Jesus with the masculine designations *Son*, *Son of God*, and *Son of Man*[8] quite frequently.[9] In spite of these statistics, however, John, which accentuates God as *Father* as does no other NT document,[10] also gives us the most diverse Christological vocabulary of the New Testament, with profound and lasting titles such as *logos*, *bread*, *light*, *door*, *shepherd*, *resurrection*, *life*, *way*, *truth*, *vine*, *rabboni*, and *lamb*.

In short, John's gospel is not at all hesitant to use masculine titles for God and Christ—most notably *Father* and *Son*. Yet John is neither limited to nor satisfied with such titles. Reformist egalitarians who are comfortable appropriating John's approach in twenty-first-century Christian worship will freely use the language of *Father* and *Son*, as well as other masculine metaphors such as *king*. Yet these same Christians will scour the scriptures for its wide variety of names, titles, metaphors, similes, and attributes of God, Christ, and the Spirit, for reformists tend "not to discard Father language, but to include a variety of other images as well."[11]

An example of a well-known hymn that follows such a pattern is "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee," by Henry Jackson van Dyke. On the one hand, this hymn's early-twentieth-century lyrics include the line "Thou our Father, Christ our Brother," as well as the strikingly androcentric lines "Father love is reigning o'er us, Brother love binds man to man." On the other hand, the hymn provides us with elegant, creative, and gender-free descriptions of God: *God of glory*, *Lord of love*,[12] *Giver of immortal gladness*, *Center of unbroken praise*, *Wellspring of the joy of living*, and *Ocean depth of happy rest*.

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5. Ibid., 20.

6. Ibid., 3

7. See chapters 4 and 6 of Thompson, *The Promise of the Father.*

8. I am painfully aware that I bow here to common terminology, for *Son of Man* in the NT translates *huios tou anthrōpou*, not *huios tou andros*.

9. About forty times, more frequently than Mark and Luke, less frequently than Matthew because of the high frequency of *Son of Man* in Matthew.

10. Thompson, *The Promise of the Father*, 19.

11. Ibid.

12. For reasons beyond the scope of this article, I have determined not to consider the biblical use of *Lord* to be a masculine title in spite of its use as a counterpart to *Lady* in peerage systems of the United Kingdom and elsewhere.

Equally illustrative of this Johannine pattern is "Be Thou My Vision," an ancient Irish hymn translated in the early twentieth century by Mary Elizabeth Byrne and versified by Eleanor Henrietta Hull. Though this hymn's androcentric language includes the address *High King of heaven*, and the lines "Thou my great Father, I Thy true son," it is a veritable catalog of genderless images of God. Perhaps the hymn is so beloved because many of its divine images are personalized: *my vision*, *Lord of my heart*, *my best thought*, *my light*, *my wisdom*, *my true Word*, *my shield*, *my sword*, *my dignity*, *my might*, *my soul's shelter*, *my high tower*, *power of my power*, *mine inheritance*, *my treasure*, and *heart of my own heart*.

A more recent example that displays this pattern is "You Are Holy," by Marc Imboden and Tammi Rhoton.[13] This well-known worship song includes several masculine metaphors for God and Christ: *King of Kings*, *Prince of Peace*, *Ancient of Days*, and *Messiah*. Yet the song also provides numerous gender-free metaphors for God and Christ: *Mighty God*, *Emmanuel*, *the Great I Am*, *Lamb*, *Living God*, *Saving Grace*, *Alpha*, *Omega*, *Beginning and End*, *Savior*, *Redeemer*, and *Friend*.

Biblical Models: Hebrews

In strong contrast to John's gospel, the Epistle to the Hebrews only twice refers to God as *Father*. The first occurrence (1.5) is in an OT quotation of 2 Samuel 7.14 (paralleled in 1 Chr 17.13). The second is the unique reference to *Father of spirits* in 12.9.[14] Like the Gospel of John, Hebrews contributes to our rich Christological vocabulary, using the uncommon metaphors *apostle* (3.1) and *shepherd* (13.20), and alone among the books of the New Testament focusing on the titles *priest* and *high priest* (these latter, admittedly, being masculine images).

Many egalitarians will be more comfortable appropriating the approach of Hebrews in twenty-first-century worship than that of John's gospel. Such worship would be characterized by a great reduction, though not complete removal, of *Father* in reference to God. In addition, a variety of titles for God and Christ would be sought, including rarely used titles such as *high priest*. These varied titles need not all come from Hebrews; rather, just as Hebrews has borrowed *high priest* from elsewhere in the canon, and just as Hebrews adopts the word *apostle* as an unique reference to Christ, the modern worshipper may adopt these patterns of borrowing.

One example of a song that, like Hebrews, both minimizes Father language and offers a variety of titles for God is "God of Wonders."[15] This song has only one occurrence of *Father* (in the line, "Father hold me," which occurs in a section that would not typically be repeated). In addition, the song describes God in several borrowed ways—*Lord of all creation*, *Lord of heaven and earth*, *Lord on high*, *precious Lord*—and also adopts the unique and awe-inspiring appellation *God of wonders beyond our galaxy*.

The hymn "I Need Thee Every Hour," by Annie S. Hawks (1872), tells of a God who speaks with "tender voice" and is ever-present ("stay thou near by," "when thou art nigh," "come quickly and abide"). For those who appreciate the pattern of Hebrews, the hymn's one reference to Christ as *blessed Son* will not detract from its other images—*Savior*, *most gracious Lord* and *most Holy One*.

Biblical Models: James

James uses *Father* for God only three times (1.17, 27; 3.9). While this small number of references is similar to Hebrews, three additional factors distinguish James from Hebrews in regard to gender language. First, at 1.18 James pushes back against a stereotypical understanding of God as a father. In verse 17 James calls God *the Father of Lights*, yet verse 18 attributes to this Father of Lights the undeniably female action of giving birth.[16] Second, at 1.27 James again challenges one stereotypical view of fatherhood: "Religion that God our Father

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13. Copyright 1994, Imboden Music. Also recorded by Michael W. Smith on the 2002 album, *Worship Again*.

14. "Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live!" (Heb 12.9 NIV 2011).

15. By Marc Byrd and Steve Hindalong, copyright 2000, New Spring.

16. See Jeffrey D. Miller, "Can the 'Father of Lights' Give Birth?" *Priscilla Papers* 19, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 5–7.

accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (NIV 1984, 2011). This reference to *God our Father* distances itself from some stereotypical views of fatherhood and masculinity, instead indicating that what God our Father accepts is compassionate care of society's most needy and a holy relationship with the world. Third, James never refers to Jesus as *Son*, unlike Hebrews which uses this designation frequently. Thus twenty-first-century worship based on the pattern of James noted above would minimize *Father* and *Son* and would feature contexts that push back against stereotypical connotations of these titles.

Shifting from designations for God and Christ to those for fellow Christians, at 2.15 James uses the phrase *a brother or sister* instead of the NT's ubiquitous *brothers*: "Suppose a brother or sister [*adelphos e ̄ adelphē*] is without clothes and daily food" (NIV 1984, 2011). James is clear that the poor are to be cared for without gender distinction. Though James here uses gender-inclusive wording, it is not as if James suddenly and anachronistically became politically correct. In fact, several times James elsewhere uses *brothers* to refer to his entire audience. Perhaps the reason James *here* expands his wording with *or a sister* is that this chapter begins with James exhorting his hearers not to show favoritism. That is, he is practicing what he preaches! Similarly, later in this same chapter, verses 21–26 offer both Abraham and Rahab as tandem examples of the inseparable bond of faith and works. Rahab comes second, and her commendation begins with *likewise*, or *in the same way* (*homoiōs*). Again, James is practicing what he preaches.[17]

Unfortunately, not all English translations practice what James preaches.[18] The NIV 1984, for example, reads as follows: "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to *him*, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed' but does nothing about *his* physical needs, what good is it?" (James 2.15–16, italics added). Though the biblical author has gone out of the way to include sisters, these Bible translators have gone out of their way to minimize the gender-inclusive effect by using *him* and *his* to describe these Christian sisters. This inaccurate and unnecessary addition of masculine language is all the more striking in light of the fact that the cumulative voice of the English Bible tradition—including, for example, ESV, RSV, NASB, KJV (1611), the Geneva Bible (1599), and even Tyndale (1534)—faithfully translates the plural pronouns.[19] Another example of English translators making James sound more androcentric than necessary concerns the well-known testimony to the power of prayer which begins, "Elijah was a man just like us" (James 5.17, NIV 1984). Most English translations use the word *man* here (KJV, ASV, RSV, NASB, NKJV, ESV, NIV 1984), in spite of the Greek use of *anthrōpos* ("human") rather than *anēr* ("man").[20]

Biblical Models: 2 Corinthians

The opening address and salutation in each of Paul's thirteen canonical letters includes a reference to *God our Father* or *God the Father.* Thus Paul's use of masculine language for God must be admitted at the outset. On the other hand, I contend that most people would assume Paul's masculine language for God is more pervasive than it actually is. In Romans, for example, Paul's longest letter, God is referred to as *Father* in only four places (1.7; 6.4; 8.15; 15.6). In 1 Corinthians, Paul's second longest letter, God is referred to as *Father* only three times (1.3; 8.6; 15.24). Four Pauline letters (1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon) refer to God as *Father* only in the opening salutation.

It is not only Paul's letters which use less masculine divine language than commonly assumed, but masculine language for God in contemporary worship music as well is not as frequent as one might think. It is common, of course, especially regarding the pronouns *he, him,* and *his*."But calling God *Father* and Jesus *Son*

17. See Luke Timothy Johnson, "Gender in the Letter of James: A Surprising Witness," pp. 221–34 in *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God: Studies in the Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

18. For more on gender-accurate Bible translation, see the author's chapter in Ronald Pierce and Cynthia Long Westfall, eds., *Discovering Biblical Equality*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, forthcoming in 2018).

19. NIV 2011 has made the appropriate changes to *them* and *their* (the Greek is *autois* in both cases).

20. New American Bible, New Jerusalem Bible, NRSV, NLT, NIV 2011, and CEB use *human (being)* or *person* at James 5.17. Note also that the *us* of "just like us" is the gender-free pronoun *hemin*.

is surprisingly infrequent. Christian Copyright Licensing International, commonly known as CCLI, makes available through its website songselect.com the most commonly used worship songs from their database. This service is widely used among English-speaking evangelical congregations. A quick review of their top forty hits, so to speak, reveals the unexpected discovery that only three of these forty songs refer to Christ as *Son* ("How Great is Our God," "How Great Thou Art," and "Your Great Name"). And only one of these top forty refers to God as *Father* ("How Great is Our God")![21]

As with James above, I shift here to learn from Paul about language used to refer to one another, rather than language for God. I take my lead from Paul's use of an OT text in 2 Corinthians. In chapter 6, verses 16–18, the apostle strings together a three-verse "quotation" from Leviticus, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and 2 Samuel. In the chart below, take careful note that Paul has adjusted the portion taken from 2 Samuel by adding the words *and daughters*.

2 Samuel 7.14a	2 Corinthians 6.18
"I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me" (NRSV).	"I will be your father, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty" (NRSV).

In 2 Samuel 7, God speaks to Nathan the prophet in the context of King David's desire to build a temple. In this context *him* is Solomon: "I will be to him [Solomon] as a father . . . ." The NT context is Paul's appeal to the Corinthian Christians to improve their behavior—to "open wide their hearts" (v. 13) and specifically to avoid idols (v. 16)—because God cares for them as "the temple of the living God" (v. 16).

The quotation below captures Paul's mindset and motivation as he adds *and daughters* to his OT reference.

> We are not caving in to the culture when we translate *adelphoi* as "brothers and sisters" or *anthrōpoi* as "men and women." We are not caving in to the culture when we refer to "people" instead of "men" or "humanity" instead of "man" in our lessons and sermons. . . . We are following the practice of Paul. . . . He was resolved to think and talk about gender in Christian ways, inclusive ways. And we too must talk as inclusively as we think.
>
> The insight that women are included is as prophetic now as it was in the time of Paul. It challenges the patriarchal understanding we have regarding the standing of women among the covenant people of God. And it challenges us to reject the use of patriarchal, gender-exclusive language, not to be politically correct but to be pertinently covenantal and positively Christian, to think and talk about women in a way that honors them and the people of God and the person of God. Paul included women when he thought about the human race. He included women when he thought about the church. And he included women when he thought about God.[22]

Following the models of James and 2 Corinthians 6, some relatively recent hymns admirably avoid masculine language when speaking of Christian brothers and sisters. Consider, for example, "We Are Called to Be God's People," "We Are God's People," and the Advent carol "For Ages Women Hoped and Prayed."[23] While cutting-edge contemporary songs are more likely to refer to brothers *and sisters*, some older music does so as

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21. http://www.songselect.com. This count was made on June 25, 2013. An updated count in September 2015 revealed three of forty songs referring to God as *Father* and seven of forty songs referring to Jesus as *Son*. One, for example, is "This I Believe (The Creed)" by Ben Fielding and Matt Crocker, copyright 2014 Hillsong Music Publishing, modeled on The Apostles' Creed.

22. Lee Magness, "The Significance of Paul's Addition of 'and daughters' in 2 Corinthians 6:18," *Priscilla Papers* 29, no. 2 (Spring, 2015): 4-5.

23. Thomas A. Jackson (1975, Broadman Press), Bryan Jeffrey Leech (1976, Fred Bock Music Company), Jane Parker Huber (1986, Jane Parker Huber), respectively.

well. Gloria and Bill Gaither's "The Family of God," for example, was published in 1970 and includes the line "You will notice we say brother and sister 'round here."[24] More than a century earlier, the hymn "For the Beauty of the Earth" praised God "for the joy of human love, brother sister parent child."[25] Beyond this short list of examples, a quick Internet search yields various resources for gender-inclusive worship resources.

Conclusion

The Restoration Movement should have a vested interest in restoring divine biblical images and, I propose, in reforming the contemporary church's often-androcentric worship language. The readership of *Leaven* surely includes differences of opinion and preference on such matters. In the congregations where we serve and worship, where the percentage of egalitarians is not as high as among those reading this article, these differences will increase multifold, in both variety and intensity. Whatever your setting, I encourage you to take the lead, whether in small ways or large. As stated by Lee Magness in the previous quotation, may we strive "not to be politically correct but to be pertinently covenantal and positively Christian." Finally, brothers and sisters, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col 3.16–17 NRSV).

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24. Gloria Gaither and William Gaither (1970, William J. Gaither, Inc.).

25. Lyrics by Folliot S. Pierpoint, 1864.