

MASCULINE AND FEMININE IN BIBLICAL TERMINOLOGY
CONCERNING THE DEITY
AND THE CONSEQUENCES FOR CONGREGATIONAL LIFE

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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Masculine pronouns are consistently used throughout the Bible in reference to God. There are no exceptions. Masculine terms are used to describe God, such as father, husband, king, lord. Moreover, our Lord Jesus Christ in his incarnation became a man.

The question is whether this uniformity is accidental. The ancient world was well aware of female deities; they were sometimes the chief deity of the worshipper. The consistency of biblical usage cannot therefore be explained as accidental, and for similar reasons it is improbable that it should be merely sociological, reflecting the customs of the day. If the reason is theological, that is, if it is based on God's attributes, and his relation to the world, this is the complete explanation of the consistent biblical usage, and it should control our own usage and thought.

The Theological reasons for the consistent referring to God as Masculine.

Three attributes of God are revealed in Scripture which are relevant to this question. His authority and dignity; his power and omnipotence; and his creative initiative and causality.

God created humanity as men and women; and as they stand before him, men and women are absolutely equal. They are equidistant from him, and they enjoy equal access to him, so that in Christ "there is neither male or female" (Gal. 3:28). These real distinctions of human life have no relevance in our relationship with God.

In the created world in general men and women are equal, and the different functions and jobs they discharge in society will be determined by their native abilities and their opportunities, except of course in such societies where custom improperly restricts these opportunities unequally. It is true that men as a whole have masculine characteristics while women as a whole have feminine characteristics and that these characteristics will determine the general style of society. But there will always be exceptions in that some women will have characteristics more common to men and vice versa. It would be wrong to restrict a woman from occupying any position in society which her gifts and opportunities fit her for.

But turning from the general social life where men and women are equal, to those relationships of men and women in which the polarity of the sexes has significance, namely marriage and the home, we see both in nature and in Scripture distinctions which are never confused. Here the roles of male and female are quite distinct, cannot be reversed or interchanged and are not the same.

It is in fact this area of relationship to one another which gives meaning to the bifurcation of the sexes and which controls the masculine terminology for God. For in the relationship of man and woman in sex, that is to say in marriage, it is seen that God has imposed the pattern of his relationship to creation on the male in a primary way. Considered individually as members of society at large both men and women reflect the divine attributes of authority, power and creativity. Both have authority and dignity, both have power, and both have creative initiative. But considered in their relationship, that is to say in the polarity of the sexes, the male displays greater authority (if only in the depth of his voice), greater power (if only in the strength

of his biceps) and clearly has sole physiological initiative in procreation, that is, in creative initiative and causality.

The impress of this definite pattern is found only in the institution of marriage. There is no necessity for it to be projected into the ad hoc institutions that arise in society, so that the extension of the male primacy into all these institutions is illegitimate, and this for example, was the mistake John Knox made in his book "The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regimen (i.e. rule) of Women".

The relationship of marriage is modelled by the creator on his own relationship to creation. In marriage the husband reflects Christ, his spouse reflects the church (Eph. 5). Consequently it is not surprising that the Bible affirms the primacy of male to female in the marriage relationship. Thus man was made first, then woman. (Gen 2:21,22; 1 Tim 2:13). Thus also man was made then woman was made for him, and not vice versa, (Gen 2:18; 1 Cor 11:9), and was made from him (1 Cor 11:8). Paul affirms that the head of every woman is the man, the head of every man is Christ and the head of Christ is God (1 Cor 11:3), and the woman is the glory of man but man is the glory and image of God (1 Cor 11:7). The woman is the weaker (1 Peter 3:7) and is the less suitable for leadership (1 Tim. 3:14). This is ascertainable by the relationship of husband and wife as a consequence of fallen human nature (Gen 3:16c). It is important to recognise that this differentiation of function within marriage does not imply any inferiority. The Bible is absolutely clear on this (1 Cor. 11:11,12) nor is there any reason why it should be carried over into ordinary social relationship outside the marriage bond.

Thus when God is spoken of in Scripture, or when he became incarnate in human form he is masculine because he displays the male attributes par excellence as these are distinct

in the male/female polarity. To creation at large, God is neither masculine nor feminine. To mankind he is masculine (though the Scriptures do not affirm that he is male but uses the masculine pronouns) and in Jesus he became incarnate as a man.

In addition to the three divine attributes of authority, power and creativity, God is also love. The human experience of love is in accordance of the modes of the different sexes, and in describing God's love for his people, he is consistently described as the Father, the husband and the saviour of the body. In Eph 3:15 St. Paul affirms that all fatherhood is derived from and takes its character from the fatherhood of God.

The consequence of the masculine terminology for God for the organisation of human relationships depends on whether that relationship is organised according to the family, or is an ad hoc association in society at large. The family in its organisation is closely related to and depends on the polarity of the sexes and therefore it reflects the relationship of men and women in their sexual relationship in which the headship and primacy is in the husband.

The organisation of the Christian congregation should reflect that of the family, for it is not an ad hoc association or social grouping in which masculinity and femininity have no special part to play. Husband and wife are the microcosm of Christ and his people (Eph 5:21-32). The congregation is the local expression of this same relationship of Christ and his people. Hence the fellowship of the family and that of the congregation are closely united. We may assume, therefore, that God will not organise the fellowship of the congregation to contravene the divine ordering of the fellowship of the family, for the family is modelled on the divine relationship of God and his people, of Christ and his church.

Thus the family and the congregation stand together over against all other human organisations as they alone are both expressions of God's relationship to his people. Thus God's pattern for the organisation of the congregation will not contradict but will be found to be in conformity with the pattern of the organisation of the family. This is the explanation why scripture so clearly forbids wives to rule in the congregation (1 Tim 3:12) for they are not to rule their husbands in the family. There is a very large teaching ministry for women - it extends over more than half humanity! - but it is to be confined to the teaching of women and is not to be exercised in the congregation in a way that would imply dominion over men. Church leaders should give more attention to encouraging and training women to teach in their own homes and for the elder women to teach the younger women how to conduct Christian homes. The home is the basis of society.

Two further practical considerations support the above conclusions.

1. The congregation will be composed for the most part by families who should have been worshipping together in their own homes during the week. The sole raison d'être of the existence of the congregation is confined within this aspect of family life, namely, Christian fellowship. It does not go beyond it. In the home the wife is to be obedient to her husband 'calling him lord' - metaphorically no doubt in our society, but indicating a genuine relationship! It will not be God's will for this relationship to be turned topsy-turvy in his congregation, when a family joins in with the other families and indeed with all the Christians of the locality.

2. It is impractical for a woman to admonish another woman's husband. Husbands may without impropriety admonish one another, but again it may well be impractical for one husband to admonish another man's wife. Husbands rule their own homes.

The fact that no one admonishes anybody in the modern congregation nor rules another's conscience through the word of God is only a condemnation of our modern ways and is no justification for departing further from the biblical norm by appointing women to the 'absolutescent' position of ruling and so effectively excluding the possibility of its revival and return to its biblical function.

Scripture is absolutely clear that women are not to rule in the congregation or to engage in all forms of teaching which involve ruling. From the above it should be clear that these scriptural directives are binding on us as being theological and not merely sociological. They spring from the created order and not from changing social customs.

Certain important consequences for congregational life follow. The congregation should nourish the spiritual life and fellowship of the family. Up to half a dozen leaders should be chosen in each congregation whose first ministry should be to minister to families, i.e. to fathers and mothers to encourage them to ensure that their home is a school of Christ. Fathers and mothers should teach their children an hour a day the Christian faith and its consequences for living. They will never persevere in this unless encouraged to do so by the leaders visiting them in their homes to enquire and exhort them along this line. It is a task too large for the full time minister single handed. A large part of his time will be devoted to preparation for preaching,

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for unless his preaching and teaching reaches a proper level of fulness of content, fathers and mothers will never be able to keep on teaching their children day by day, and unless homes have this depth of Christian knowledge and commitment, congregations will remain weak and shallow and evaporating.

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