

## **Fifth Thesis**

*Whatever God is, God does not have a penis.*

*“Father” is just a metaphor and an increasingly dysfunctional one. Asking for occasional use of inclusive language and metaphors is not as obsessive as the insistence that the father/masculine metaphor be normative or even exclusive.*

In some ways this thesis is merely a corollary of the fourth thesis – it is part of the discussion of the nature of God. Most folks, even those who believe they have a deep, personal relationship with God Almighty, still appear to believe that God is Almighty. That is to say, they still believe in a God that is out there somewhere, who is powerful and mighty, separate and apart from us. Many Christians talk about a God who is a judge, albeit a merciful judge. In spite of that separateness, most people still picture God as a human being. People who say they see just a cloud in their minds when they picture God are not to be trusted. Besides, I think it is natural to anthropomorphize God when we picture God or discuss God. In our sphere of understanding, we tend to understand humanity as the pinnacle of creation. We at least want to think of God as sentient, don't we? As I discussed in the fourth thesis, our experience is the only thing through which we can understand anything. So why wouldn't we picture God as a human being with human qualities since human qualities are the highest level we can perceive? The problem, I think, is that most folks tend to think of God as having only some human qualities rather than imagining God with the infinite variety of wonder that is humanity.

I have been continually surprised by the people I've run into over the years who believe deep in their heart of hearts that God is a man. Of course, I find it easy to deal with these types of folks because they are clearly just a bit “tetched.” That would be “not right” to those of you not fully versed in the language of my southern farmer ancestors and “nuts” to anyone who has no knowledge of the local language at all. The most prominent explanation I've heard for this odd belief is that God created Adam in his own image. Ergo, this sensational syllogism continues, God must be a man. God's a man; God creates Adam in his own image; Adam is a man. It really is a fascinating exercise in Funhouse Logic.

I've also been surprised by the people who have claimed that they could refer to God exclusively as Father and by masculine pronouns without having a mental image of God as a man. I had a class once where our professor presented information from various studies that showed when people (regardless of their sex) were read stories in which the characters were exclusively referred to by masculine pronouns (but no other identifying information), the listeners later described the character as a man. For instance, the subjects were read stories about a doctor. “When a doctor meets a patient, he first takes a routine medical history. After that, he performs a cursory initial physical exam.” One hundred percent of the subjects of the study later identified the doctor as a man. No one understood the pronouns as “generic”. But I hear people say that even though they only use masculine pronouns for God, they never picture God as a man. Of course.

Even that description begs the question of why you'd use masculine pronouns exclusively. If you don't believe God is a man, then what is the problem with using feminine pronouns? Some

folks tell me that masculine pronouns are generic in English. The study I sketchily describe above belies that claim. And English itself belies that claim. Shakespeare commonly used plural pronouns for unknown singular antecedents. If there is such a rule (that masculine pronouns are “generic”) then I believe it is a fairly recent rule. If Shakespeare didn’t follow it, is it really a rule? The highly touted “rule” that you aren’t supposed to split infinitives is not a rule, just a guideline for composition. Are masculine pronouns really generic? or are they used because through most of English speaking history men were (are?) considered superior?

If you truly believe that proper English construction requires the use of masculine pronouns, does that really matter? Doesn’t Paul tell us when he discusses the consumption of Corinthian meat that if something you do causes someone else to stumble you shouldn’t do it? So if exclusive use of masculine pronouns for God causes others to believe that God is a man – i.e., that God is equal to God’s creation – then isn’t that a good enough reason to stop using masculine pronouns exclusively? If we really believe that God has no sex (poor God) then why not use a variety of descriptions *just like in the Bible!* Hens and eagles, women looking for coins and fathers looking for prodigal sons.

I don’t really believe that the preeminence of the masculine gender in the English language is not related to the patriarchal structure of our society on an historical basis. We assume masculinity because historically we, as a society, have believed that you should really give things the benefit of the doubt and not assume something is lesser until you know for sure. So we assume things and people are male until proven otherwise. (Similarly we assume people are heterosexual, white, wealthy, on and on.) I think I’m right on this. The obvious exception is things that men possess: cars, boats, tools – often referred to as “she”.

But if I’m wrong, I still think sex is inappropriately attributed to divinity. I’m sure that I’ve discussed this before, but male doesn’t mean anything without female. When God created humankind in Genesis, God first created the human and then split the human into male and female. Out of “chamah” God created “chadamah” – or as Phyllis Trible stated it: “the human from the humus.” Creating a male creature is nonsensical without a corresponding female. The creation story is (*inter alia*) an explanation of procreation – it tells us why there is male and female and not just a human. It just wouldn’t make sense for there to be a manGod without a womanGod. Sexual variety is an evolutionary development; it is a part of creation not the creator. A creator with a wee wee just doesn’t make sense. Why on earth, so to speak, would an Unmoved Mover have a penis? Let’s say God did create Adam as God’s direct image, hoohah and all. What happened when God created Eve? Did God say to Godself, “Hey. Let’s put something on this Eve model so Adam’ll have something to do with his penis?” Really?

It is clear to me, you must have surmised by now, that the exclusive use of male imagery for God is a culturally determined phenomenon. It has nothing to do with the actual nature of God. Further, I believe that it is harmful. It’s not like the Nazis or anything like that but it is a constant reminder to women (at least in conservative Christian churches) that they are not considered equal to men; that men are like God and women are afterthoughts. That kind of thing will eventually wear you down. I know that the example of doctors has changed some because we have many women doctors now. But the change has been recent so allow me to use it. If you constantly refer to doctors by male terms, children believe that doctors are men. A girl with an

extraordinary facility for medicine then has a huge hurdle to jump that boys don't face. Before she can face the challenges of medical training, she has to convince herself that it's even possible for her to be a doctor. Then she probably has to convince her family and friends – or learn to ignore them and live without their support. That's hard.

How much more influential is the use of male imagery for God? We are monotheists so it's not like we can see goddesses about like we see women doctors. Girls grow up thinking that God is masculine, that masculine traits are also divine traits. How can that not affect their self esteem? Certainly boys are also affected, but at least they're not brought up to know that God is fundamentally different than they are and like someone else.

It's not that I'm asking anyone to give up using masculine imagery for God. I have friends who exclusively use feminine pronouns and female imagery for God. They do so, I think, as a defense against the other side of the equation and I agree that you could have a lot of people exclusively refer to God as female before you ever reach any parity with the FatherGod folks. But I think most of us know that God isn't a man or a woman. My hope is that someday we'll use masculine and feminine imagery for God in equal measures with the understanding that God is neither male nor female, but that what is best in humanity is the best we can do to describe what is divine, whether God is divine other or not. The goal of inclusive language, as I understand it, isn't to do away with male imagery and replace it with something equally limited and limiting. The goal is to be sure that everyone hears language about God with which she can relate. The goal is to be sure that everyone hears language about God that makes them relate to others who are different. God has no race and God is black, white and brown. God has no sex and God is male and female. God is not a physical body and God is able to run but may also need a wheelchair.

We sing “We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand.” When someone asks about adding a verse that might include someone who can't walk, is that so bad? I don't think the idea is to redefine God so much as to remind the singers that not everyone can walk and that God is the God of all of us, not just the physically fit. If someone wants to change a verse in a hymn so that God isn't a mighty warrior all the way through, that doesn't mean that God can't be a General Patton, it just means that God might also be a Florence Nightingale or a Molly Pitcher. I think that the use of truly inclusive language broadens our understanding of God and of each other in ways that can only make life richer and more meaningful for all of us.

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I want to take a minute to digress from the topic at hand to comment on Trinitarian formulae. People like me – the inclusive language nuts among us – often have a problem with the Trinitarian formula: “Father, Son & Holy Ghost”. I understand that problem and I sympathize with it. But I have to say that I find attempts like “Creator, Christ and Comforter” leave me cold. They are usually just lists of titles. “Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.” Yawn. The magnificent thing about “Dad, Jr., and Holy Ghost” is that it is relational. I find a formula that talks about a father and a son and the relationship between them (Holy Ghost) much more satisfying. (I'm dying to talk about the addition of the *et filioque* clause to the Apostle's Creed, but I'll save that for later, if I remember.) I think it would work just as well to talk about a mother and a daughter,

but we have that scandal of specificity in the historical Jesus. I don't really know why Mother and Son wouldn't work but I've never really heard anyone broach that one. Do we have some sort of oedipal fear of that combination? In any event, I go on record as preferring the construction adopted by Riverside Church in NYC: "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all." I'm just saying....

**[There will be a separate thread on the discussion forum for sharing your thoughts on this Fifth Thesis. Please feel free to share your own understandings, etc., there.]**