



God and Pronouns: He Knows What He Is Doing

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“It has not been for nothing that the word has remained man’s principal toy and tool: without the meanings and values it sustains, all man’s other tools would be worthless.” – Lewis Mumford

“But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.” – Matthew 12:36-37

Words matter. Pronouns make pertinent points. The recent decision by the Episcopal Diocese of Washington D.C. to ban the use of masculine pronouns when referring to God is no mere matter of semantics. The effects on those who subscribe to the ban will be significant.

Let’s be clear right up front, however. God is not human—neither male nor female in the sense that we understand gender. Most Christians recognize that the Bible uses metaphors to paint pictures of God that we can better understand. When we read the psalmist’s plea to “Let me dwell in Your tent forever; Let me take refuge in the shelter of Your wings,” we understand that God is not a giant bird. The metaphor of taking shelter in God’s wings helps us see God’s caring, protective nature.

Similarly, when we see the Bible's numerous uses of male pronouns to refer to God, we understand that God is not really a man. So, then, what's wrong with banning the use of male pronouns in referring to God? After all, the D.C. diocese argued, "By expanding our language for God, we will expand our image of God and the nature of God."

The problem with this ban goes deeper than the words themselves. Words, as Lewis Mumford noted, are tools; they are tools that carry and convey concepts. When the Bible uses anthropomorphic terms—and specifically male pronouns—in referring to God, it is using words to convey the concept of God's authority and how He has chosen to delegate that authority.

The Bible clearly states that God ordained lines of leadership. Space restrictions prevent me from quoting every Bible passage that refers to male leadership, so I'll simply list a few—from among the scores—of pertinent addresses for readers to examine: Genesis 2:18; Genesis 3:16; 1 Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 5:21-33; 1 Peter 3:1-7.

Now all that might sound strange coming from a woman who leads two prominent ministries. Yes, I am confident that God chose me to lead Help4Families and Living Stones Ministries. But that does not mean that in doing so God abandoned the principle of male leadership. Likewise, that God set in play the principle of male leadership does not mean that no woman can ever lead in any capacity.

Deborah was a judge who led the nation of Israel. Moses' sister Miriam had earlier helped lead that same nation during its infancy. King Josiah chose the prophetess Huldah to help him govern the nation. And who can forget the important roles of Ruth, Esther, Mary, Martha, Priscilla, Phoebe, and many more?

Women are just as important as men in God's dealings with humanity. But equality in essence is not the same as equality in function. My husband and I are equals in God's eyes and in our marriage relationship. But my husband is the one God chose to lead our family. He is the one God designated as our protector. He is the one who—in their formative years—modeled God to our children. He is the one who will have to answer to God for how he led our family.

God is not a man, and apart from Jesus, no man can perfectly represent God. But God created each person with certain roles to fulfill. The Bible plainly reveals that God created men to lead within families and within the Church. To emphasize that God-ordained leading role for men, God chose to refer to himself using male pronouns.

No, God is not a man in the sense that we think of as male. But He is male in the sense that He is the Head—the authority figure—over His "family" and over His Church. Abolishing the Bible's male pronouns referring to God is equivalent to rejecting His role as King.

Yes, words matter. A little word like he, him, or his might seem insignificant at a surface level, but the deeper meaning each conveys can be life-altering. God knew what He was doing when He chose to refer to Himself using male pronouns.

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