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FORUM

Vol 1 No. 2

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COVER STORY

ORDINATION OF WOMEN AND OF GAYS: Are They on a Par?

One of the reasons people resist the opening of ecclesiastical offices to women is that they fear it is only the beginning. Delegates to synod sometimes express this fear in their speeches. They say that if women enter the ruling offices,



they may leave the door open for other unsuitable persons. In particular, they may leave it open for self-avowed and practicing homosexuals

who defend the gay life as a normal option. (Let's call these persons lifestyle gays.) If the church ordains women, synodical delegates say, then what's to prevent her from ordaining lifestyle gays too? Where does it all stop?

This line of talk is unsavory. It yokes women with lifestyle gays. The fear along this line, apparently, is that if the church invites a devout woman like Johanna Veenstra to preach the gospel to us, then, before long, some militant flamingo from Act Up will do it too.

Should Christian Reformed men who respect their mothers and daughters link them with people who practice and defend a sexual disorder?

The comparison is distasteful, and it goes downhill from there. Mainly, the comparison is unbiblical. For, obviously enough, the Bible nowhere places women and lifestyle gays in the same category, or suggests that if one group is suitable for ministry, then so is the other. To the contrary (again, this seems painfully obvious), the Bible teaches that women are a natural kind of creature--in fact, a triumphant exhibit in Genesis 1 and 2 of God's goodness and ingenuity.



CORNELIUS PLANTINGA, JR.

Professor of systematic theology at Calvin Seminary.

Lifestyle gays, on the other hand, are a certain kind of sinner--in fact, emblems in Romans 1 of human darkness and disorientation. In short, femininity belongs to creation; gait, to the fall.

Of course, it does not follow that, according to the Bible, practicing homosexuals are worse sinners than

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COVER STORY cont.

CORNELIUS PLANTINGA

everybody else. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, St. Paul lists, among others, greedy persons, robbers, and revilers along with sodomites as rebels against the kingdom, and gives no hint that we should fear or reject one sort of rebellion more than the next. In Romans 1, where he features homosexual acts as an example of degradation, Paul treats idolatry as the root sin.

In short, Paul lists homosexual acts along with sins we know well--greed, slander, robbery, and idolatry. Don't some of us idolize sports, for instance, or professional success? Don't some of us suffer from greed or from inflated self-esteem? And don't we

you noticed how odd this is? Nobody at synod warns us that if we ordain women, then the next step will be to ordain thieves. Nobody says, "Look, if we ordain women, then watch out, because before you know it we're going to have some sports nut in the consistory!"

Why is that? Why the difference in warnings?

Is it because history shows that the church never does ordain greedy, larcenous, or idolatrous persons, and that we therefore needn't worry about them? Hardly. Church news is full of sad evidence to the contrary.

Well, then, do people warn "women today, gays tomorrow" because churches who ordain women usually follow up by ordaining lifestyle gays? I doubt it. After all,

denominations, including the CRC, have homosexual offi-

be theologically correct--and, perhaps, pastorally helpful--

“NOBODY AT SYNOD WARNS US THAT IF WE ORDAIN WOMEN, THEN THE NEXT STEP WILL BE TO ORDAIN THIEVES.”

— Plantinga

“Why do we ostracize the one sort of sinner, and befriend the other?”

sometimes joke about these sins, or minimize them as pardonable excesses? Don't we do this at the same time that we loathe homosexual acts and revile those who commit them?

Why is that? Why do we make a lot of the one sort of sin and comparatively less of the other? Why do we ostracize the one sort of sinner and befriend the other? And, in any case, why do we never pair up these other sorts of sinners with women? Have

Assemblies of God congregations have had women preachers, but not gay ones, for many decades. The same is true, for varying lengths of time, of the RCA, the PCUSA, the ELCA, the UMC, the Salvation Army, and others. A few denominations (GKN, UCC) who ordain women also ordain lifestyle gays, but most do not. Why assume that the CRC would follow the minority path here?

Of course, all sizeable

centers, but that is another matter. A homosexual is a person who is romantically and sexually attracted to members of his own sex. Some homosexuals act on their orientation and some do not. Some disclose their orientation, and many do not. Thankfully, in traditional church settings very few homosexuals commit themselves to lifestyle gaiety. Even taken as a whole, the Christian church has very few lifestyle gays in its offices.

But it does have its share of homosexuals. These are persons who are burdened with an inclination--like kleptomania, for example, or an innately hot temper--for which they bear no particular blame. Naturally, we all bear our portion of blame for original sin, however hard this is to explain. Thus, in some way we bear blame for our native tendency "to hate God and our neighbor," as the Catechism says. Similarly, if you are saddled with a hot temper and I with kleptomania and a homosexual with desire for members of his own sex, each of us bears a general responsibility for his disorder just because it expresses the original sin in which we are all implicated.

But our guilt is generic, not particular. Thus, a homosexual is not more particularly to blame for his disorder than you or I are for ours. In fact, given our corporate involvement in original sin, it would

for all of us to acknowledge our generic responsibility for other people's native disorders. So far as the Christian doctrine of original sin is concerned, what this means is that if somebody is stuck with a homosexual orientation, then this sad fact is just as much my fault as his, and just as much your fault as his.

Of course, a person may encourage or even "set" some evil tendency by acting on it. Such a person does add particular blame to his generic blame, for now he is guilty of actual as well as of original sin. This would be true of a lifestyle gay, for example. But a chaste homosexual does not become particularly guilty until he, so to speak, ratifies his disorder--till he fans his native desire into lust, for instance, or commits a genital homosexual act. In any case, though his sexual orientation is a serious and sensitive disorder, it isn't an actual sin. It's rather one expression of the generic corruption for which we are all equally to blame--a corruption that taints both our nature and our nurture.

Many Christian experts think that homosexuality includes a genetic component as well as a childhood environmental component. Either way, the conclusion is the same: like the heterosexual, the homosexual rarely chooses his orientation. He discovers it. Many Christian homo-

Cont. on page 4 ▶

David E. Holwerda, Editor

Synods and Crisis

"Synods" and "crisis" have become synonymous in the Christian Reformed Church. I wish that were not so. I pray that the Lord will bring peace and unity to this part of his church. But peace and unity will not occur until synod finds a way to resolve the question of ordaining women as elders and ministers. This question is difficult for cultural and biblical reasons.

TEXTS AND WILL OF GOD

Our present difficult situation reminds me of the crisis at the first "synod" recorded in Acts 15. The church was in danger of splitting into two over the question of circumcision. From our perspective that question looks like an easy one to answer. But it wasn't easy, and it threatened the unity of the church.

Circumcision was required by the Old Testament. This was the only Scripture they had, and all of the texts that dealt explicitly with circumcision required it.

“ Discovering God's will from the Scriptures is not always easy. ”
- Holwerda

If the question at the synod were to be settled just by quoting texts, those who insisted on the necessity of circumcision had the texts on their side. Who had the authority to say that these texts did not apply to Gentiles? Who had the authority to set aside texts that clearly taught the necessity of circumcision? That was a very difficult issue, a crisis over the authority of Scripture in the life of the church.

Discovering God's will from the Scriptures is not always easy. After listening to the experiences of Peter, Barnabas and Paul, James settled the issue by quoting Amos 9: 11-12, a text that

said nothing explicitly about circumcision. Instead, Amos 9 promised that God would gather from the Gentiles a people called by his name. Obviously God was gathering the Gentiles and was not requiring circumcision before pouring out his Spirit upon them. For that reason, James concluded that those clear Old Testament texts which required circumcision should not be applied to Gentile Christians. Isn't it amazing how God makes his will known?

I am not suggesting that Acts 15 directly solves the question of women in office. Obviously, it does not. Still, like the Synod of Jerusalem, we find ourselves in a process of weighing texts to discover God's will. Which texts should be given priority? Which texts reveal the most basic will of God in the light of which other texts should be understood? Is there a broader or more comprehensive revelation of God's will in Scripture that will enable us to properly weigh or evaluate specific texts? The issue confronting us is not easy. We pray that through his Spirit the Lord

will enable the coming synod to discover his will. We hope that, like the Synod of Jerusalem, we can find a way to live together. We pray for peace and unity.

THIS FORUM

In this issue of the *Forum* we decided not to deal with the specific question confronting this synod. It seemed inappropriate for us to do so. Had the *Forum* existed for some time, undoubtedly its pages would have been filled with discussions over this issue. The discussions would have been pro and con, for the faculty, like the church, has dif-

ferences of opinion on this matter. But we judged that now was not the time to enter into that debate.

Instead, two related matters are discussed in this issue. In the minds of some these matters are related to the question of ordaining women to office. Sometimes



General Synod

in discussions one hears the following argument: If the church opens the office of elder/minister to women, the next step will be the approval of homosexual conduct. The assumption is that this next step follows automatically and necessarily from the first. Cornelius Plantinga argues that not only does that next step not follow from the first, the assumption on which it is based is unbiblical.

A second argument frequently heard in such discussions is this: If one favors women in church office, one will favor also the use of inclusive language for God. John Cooper addresses this issue. Although he does not refer explicitly to the ordination of women, he argues that Scripture shapes our language about God, quite apart from the role of women in the church.

We hope these articles will help clarify the ongoing debate. Of course, the church is not just a debating society. Lest we lose our focus in facing crises, Calvin Van Reken reminds us of what the church is really all about in his *Parable of Grace*.

FORUM MAILINGS

A few words about matters of business. We have been pleased by the many positive comments concerning the first issue of the *Forum*. However, there have been some misunderstandings about our mailing policy. Several ministers wondered why they did not receive a personal copy

The copy for ministers serving congregations is contained in the package of six sent to the clerk of each church. We intend to continue this practice for reasons of economy. If a minister serving a congregation wishes to receive a copy directly, he will have to subscribe to the *Forum*. We would like to send a copy directly to every minister but our financial resources limit our options. We hope that the copies sent to each church will circulate and be read many times. If an article is found useful for group discussion, photocopying is permitted. We also send copies individually to various ministers who are not regular pastors of congregations, and others in leadership positions. In addition, we intend to send copies to persons who make regular contributions to the seminary.

If you are not in any of the above categories and would like to have a copy sent to your home, please send name and address plus \$8.00 (\$10.00 Canadian) and we will place you on our subscription list. Thank you for your interest! ■

COVER STORY cont.

sexuals discover their orientation with a sense of alarm--and naturally enough. Who would want such an orientation? Who would want the loneliness, shame, and fear of discovery that go with it? Many homosexuals understandably feel deeply alienated from a culture that reviles and despises them just because of their orientation.

Some of the justifiable exasperation among Christian homosexuals arises from having to deal with such attitudes even among fellow believers. Some of these believers talk as if homosexual acts are far worse than most other sins--worse than pride or envy or gluttony, for example. Such talk ought to stop. Recall that in Paul's treatment, homosexual practice appears in lists with other sins that Paul equally rejects. Notice also that if homosexual practice is an abomination" in Lev. 18:22, lots of other things in Scripture are abominations too--including, in Prov. 6:16-19, lying and stirring up dissension among fellow believers.

Some believers also talk as if a homosexual orientation is particularly blamable to the homosexual. This sort of talk ought to stop too. Yes, we all share in the blameworthiness of original sin, but, as we have seen, a homosexual bears no more particular blame for his orientation than a placid, low-wattage person does for his orientation toward sloth. In both cases, everything depends on what a person does with his orientation.

To help us gain clarity on the difference between orientation and practice, let's pursue the comparison between homosexuals and revilers--the comparison suggested by Paul's listing them together in

I Corinthians 6. Let's think of a person (call him Bobby K.) who from childhood displays a lot of anger. All through childhood and adolescence he keeps popping his cork.

ed to let loose the volcano of passion that seethes within him, he doesn't do it. He keeps a lid on it. Remarkably, Mike K. disciplines his temper in the same way that he disci-

“Some of these believers talk as if homosexual acts are far worse than most other sins”
- Plantinga

This makes life very difficult for everybody around him, and especially for his parents and teachers. Bobby K. has a hot temper and, though he tries to keep a lid on it, sometimes he blows it.

Despite his handicap, Bobby K. manages to build a big career as a college basketball coach. He is smart and he knows how to win. Remarkably, part of his success depends on driving his players with the same passion that sometimes bursts out in one of his patented displays of rage. When he bursts, Bobby K. heaves chairs across gym floors, for instance, or challenges a referee's parentage, or publically curses a few of his student-athletes, or even kicks one of them. Worse, in interview, he defends himself by claiming that such intensity is the price of success. He adds that if his critics don't like the way he acts, why, then, they can kiss the mid-region of his posterior anatomy.

Now imagine another college basketball coach. Call him Mike K. Let's say that he too emerges from childhood with a hot temper. He too is intense, ambitious, and perfectionistic. He too is a winning coach whose edge of passion and intensity sharpens his players. What's more, though he is constantly tempt-

plines his team--with a firm, relentless, self-control.

Bobby K is like a lifestyle gay, and Mike K is like a chaste homosexual. Both find in themselves a passion that they have not chosen. One of them indulges and defends the sin that can erupt from this passion. The other disciplines himself to control and channel his passion in a constructive way.

From a biblical point of view, a person who is innately hot-tempered has a particular handicap. He possesses a disorder that he didn't choose and for which he is not particularly to blame. But there it is, burning within him, tempting him again and again to flare at others. If he is Godly, he may channel his passion into righteous indignation. He may rise in prophetic anger against evil, just as he should. But he has to watch himself: indignation easily mutates into self-indulgent rage, and anger of this kind--uncontrolled, vengeful, protracted--wrecks marriages, alienates children, loses jobs, ends friendships, splits churches, and starts wars. A lot of psychologists think that such anger is the most destructive emotion they meet. Medieval Christians put it near the top of the list of the seven deadly sins. The Bible

itself bristles with warnings against sinful anger and its children--dissension, quarreling, factions, envy, spite, bitterness, malice, friction, and slander.

Now suppose somebody at synod stood up and said: "Listen, if we ordain women to the ruling offices, next we're going to get a lot of unrepentant hot heads too."

Everybody would be puzzled. What's the connection here? Why put women on the same line with a certain sort of sinner?

After all, the Bible treats women and sinners quite differently. The Bible gives clear witness to the equal status, dignity, giftedness, and authority of women with men in creation, redemption, and consummation. This is not true of revilers or of greedy persons or of lifestyle gays. In other words, by contrast with its treatment of women, the Bible gives us no positive case for the ordination of revilers or of lifestyle gays. For example, we never read in Scripture that Jesus chose revilers to be the witnesses of his resurrection, or that lifestyle gays served in ministry alongside Paul, or that God chose them to have dominion over creation. We never read that "in Christ there is no gay or straight," no hothead or peacemaker," or anything similar. Frankly, the case for ordaining lifestyle gays rests on the same folly and confusion that would support a case for ordaining Bobby K.

Thus, when anybody tries to sell us on "women today, gays tomorrow," we ought to tell them that we aren't buying. For what they're selling is unlovely, illogical, and alien to Scripture. ■

Inclusive Language for God: It's Time to Take a Stand.

IT'S TIME FOR THE CRC TO TAKE A STAND.

Inclusive language for God is what results when the principle of gender equality (valid in many social contexts) is applied to Bible translation, theology, and worship. It requires that we call God "Mother" as well as "Father" and "she" as well as "he." Or else it forces us to avoid gender terms altogether—"Parent" instead of "Father," "Monarch" instead of "King," "Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier" instead of "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

Inclusive language has become the rule in some main-line churches. But it is also beginning to appear within the CRC. The Board of Publications and the Trustees of Calvin College have already had to face it. There is a small minority of CRC members who advocate inclusive language. A larger number use and appreciate books like Rev. Marchiene Rienstra's *The Swallow's Nest*, a devotional "translation" of the Psalms which consistently refers to God as female. And a number of CRC members are preparing for various kinds of ministry at seminaries like Western (RCA), where inclusive language is promoted by some professors. The issue is already among us.

The Synod of 1992 adopted guidelines for CRC Publications to reflect biblical language for God and not to refer to God with feminine names or pronouns [Acts, 6:15]. But it did not give reasons for its decision and declined to appoint a study committee to address the matter of inclusive language for God. And some CRC members consider Synod's guidelines for CRC Pubs as advice, but not binding policy for the whole denomination.

Perhaps 1992 was not the right time for a study committee. But this is a religiously important and culturally powerful issue which will not go away. Unless the CRC articulates a clear-headed and sensitive biblical position, feminine language for God will soon become another major cause of division among us.

A FUNDAMENTAL ISSUE

We must address inclusive language for God because it touches the very core of our faith. Like other questions

out explicitly and fully in order to provide guidance for the denomination. Doing so will involve addressing a number of complex issues which cannot be treated in a short article. But I can at least identify some of them and offer initial responses.

REASONS GIVEN FOR INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Let's begin by considering the main arguments for inclusive language. An important one is pastoral: there are a lot of women (and men) who cannot



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Synod has addressed—women in office, creation and evolution, and homosexuality—it involves the ultimate authority and proper interpretation of Scripture. More serious, however, the question of inclusive language directly involves our relationship with God himself—who he is, how we know him, and how we are to respond to him. The church's confession about God is the foundation of everything else it believes and does. Thus inclusive language is not one of the "indifferent things" over which we can agree to disagree. It is a fundamental spiritual and confessional issue.

In the present social-cultural climate, Synod must spell this

relate to the "male" God of the Bible because they have been abused by men or are frustrated by the injustice against women in our male-dominated church and society. Inclusive language is a small but essential step in reaching such people with the Gospel.

A second argument calls for justice to redress gender bias in church and theology. Until recently, it is said, only males have interpreted Scripture, formulated the creeds of the church, written its theology, and defined the practices of the church. No wonder the tradition endorses only masculine language for God! If women had been given an equal voice in

these things (so this argument goes), the church would have had inclusive language all along. Justice requires the church to give women the right to make up their own minds about hermeneutics, exegesis, theology, and worship.

A third set of arguments touches Scripture. One asserts that the revelation of God in Scripture is an accommodation to the patriarchal culture and language of Old and New Testament times. The masculine names and terms for God are historically-conditioned, not what God intends to teach the church. We must go beyond these culturally relative terms to truly understand God, who is neither male nor female but is represented or "imaged" equally well by human males and females. Thus both male and female references to God are biblically legitimate and necessary.

Another argument from Scripture asserts that since there are genuine feminine and maternal references to God in the Bible, it is fully biblical to name God both "Mother" and "Father" and to refer to God as "he" and "she."

RESPONSES TO THESE ARGUMENTS

My brief comments on these arguments will treat them in reverse order.

SCRIPTURE ARGUMENT 2

Aren't there feminine and maternal images in Scripture? Doesn't this justify inclusive language for God?

It is true that there are feminine and maternal references to

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"...naming God 'Mother' may very well violate the Third Commandment..."

God in the Bible. Isaiah 49:15, for example, likens God to a nursing mother who will not forget her child. Proverbs 8 personifies God's wisdom as a woman. Other examples include Is. 66:13 and Ps. 131:2. Obviously it is biblical to refer to God in these ways. So why can't we call God "Mother" and "she" just as validly as "Father" and "he?"

The issue here is whether all biblical references to God are equal or equivalent. This is what is demanded by the principle of male-female equality. And this is precisely where the argument breaks down.

For one thing, all the feminine references are figures of speech, metaphors, similes, and personifications. None of them are names of God such as

“
Why can't we
call God
"Mother" and
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"Father" and
"he"? ”

—Cooper

"Jahweh" and "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" are. (It is a myth that the name "El Shaddai" means "the God with breasts.") But a figure of speech is not equivalent to a name. My students might think I am "a real bear," but that does not identify me, as calling me "John" does. And it surely does not allow them to name me "Yogi" or "Smokey." To name God "Mother" as equivalent to "Father" on the basis of a few feminine figures of speech is to turn oranges into apples.

Furthermore, the Bible itself selects "Father" as the privileged reference and reveals it as the name of God (the First Person). Central in the Old Testament is the Messianic Covenant—the promise of an everlasting king who is the son of God the father (II Sam. 7:13-16). This is why Jesus the Messiah is the Son of God who addresses God as Father and teaches us to do likewise. Feminine references have no such status in the Bible.

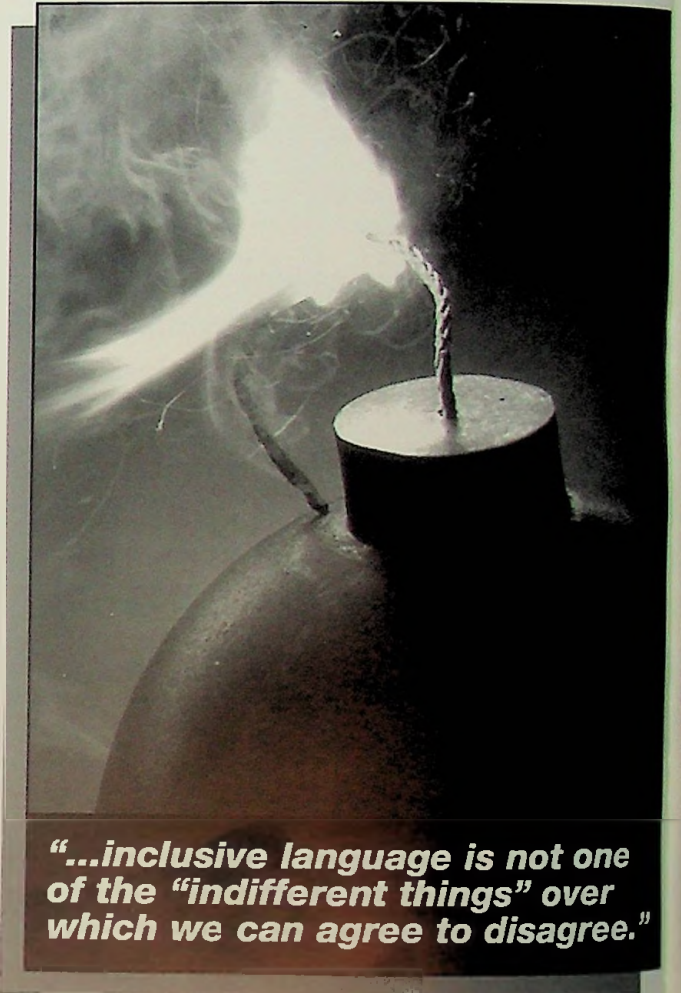
But even before the coming of the Messiah in history, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have existed in eternal fellowship. Their identity and relationship are eternal. And "Father" is the name of the First Person (Mt. 28:19; Jn. 17:1-6; Eph. 3:14-15). "Mother" is not. To elevate "Mother" to the same level as "Father" not only ignores the difference between names and figures of speech, it wholly disregards the meaning and role of these terms in redemptive history and biblical theology. Feminine images in Scripture do not justify attributing feminine names to God.

Or feminine pronouns. Jahweh or God the Father are occasionally pictured as having motherly faithfulness or tenderness or wisdom. But the personal pronouns in Hebrew and Greek correspond with their names and titles—Father, King, etc.—not to the feminine metaphors even where they occur. This is also standard English. Thus you could think of someone named John "laboring to give birth" (a feminine metaphor) to an article he is writing, but you could not therefore refer to him as "she." Pronouns are determined by personal identity, not figures of speech. To make God a "she" violates both biblical usage and good English.

While it is true that God's

nature is neither male nor female and that both genders equally image God, the divine Persons

Bible. Either "she" is a distortion of the true God or "she" does not exist. "She" is thus a false god,



"...inclusive language is not one of the "indifferent things" over which we can agree to disagree."

reveal themselves to us in masculine terms requiring masculine pronouns, certainly the Father and Son, and sometimes also the Spirit. In sum, arguments for feminine names and pronouns are inept exegesis and faulty theology.

More seriously, naming God "Mother" may very well violate the Third Commandment, which protects God's holy name. In Scripture, humans do not name God. God reveals his name and is jealous of it. Worst of all, "she" who is "our Mother in heaven" is not the God of the

graven image, a human idol. Some feminist theologians may violate the first three Commandments and place themselves in grave spiritual danger. Inclusive language is not a superficial matter.

SCRIPTURE ARGUMENT 1

But what if the masculine language for God in Scripture is not what God has revealed but is merely the culture-bound

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LANGUAGE cont.

JOHN COOPER

human representation of divine revelation, as some feminists argue?

This position is shot through with problems I can only mention. It denies the inspiration and authority of Scripture as written. It makes the presentation of God in the Bible fallible and culturally distorted—needing correction by feminist theology. This in turn implies that women's experience is a source of knowledge of God by which Scripture can be supplemented.

It is obvious that this sort of argument for inclusive language is completely irreconcilable with the high view of Scripture affirmed by the Belgic Confession and practiced by the Christian Reformed Church.

THE CHARGE OF GENDER BIAS

But isn't it true that men have formulated theology and the rules of exegesis, and doesn't this explain why tradition is against inclusive language?

Yes, men have done the theology; but no, that is not why the church worships God as Father. It does so because it has embraced a high view of Scripture, which teaches that God is Father.

I am delighted that women are studying Scripture and theology and I hope that the church will use their gifts. They have as much insight to offer as men. And they can correct masculine biases where these occur. A relevant example is the fact that most of us have completely overlooked the feminine references to God in Scripture. These female images ought to be taken seriously in our theology, our

"The church must reform its ministry in worship, education, and discipling of families so that women will be affirmed as equally gifted and equally image-bearing as men."

worship, and in our attitude toward women.

However, our theologians, male and female alike, ought to be committed to the CRC's high view of Scripture and our careful methods of reading it. People who do not share our view of Scripture, hermeneutics, and confessional position cannot expect to have their theological ideas adopted or to receive positions of leadership within the CRC.

THE PASTORAL CHALLENGE

But isn't this anti-pastoral and exclusivistic? What about abused and justly angry women? And what about those women (and men) who want to affirm God as Mother as good CRC members? How can the church minister to and affirm these people?

The church must confess that abuse occurs within its bosom, that it has sometimes made women feel less like images of God than men, and that it has not allowed women's gifts to be used fully in the church (whether or not they

should hold office). We must repent and redress these wrongs.

The church must reform its ministry in worship, education, and discipling of families so that women will be affirmed as equally gifted and equally image-bearing as men. Our theology and worship ought to reflect both that "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" is the definitive revelation of the divine name and also that God is not ashamed occasionally to portray himself in feminine terms in Scripture. These biblical texts, and songs, litanies, and sermons based on them, could be included in worship services.

And for women (and men) who find it emotionally difficult to relate to the masculine presentation of God, it might be pastorally prudent to have them focus on the feminine images for God until through personal growth and theological understanding they can again feel close to God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit "like a child quieted at its mother's breast" (Ps. 131:2b). However, focusing on our heavenly Father might still be the best way for most people to deal with the abuse and neglect of earthly fathers and mothers.

However, if people feel alienated because they do not share the denominational position on Scripture, its proper interpretation, or its teaching, we must sincerely regret that they cannot share our ecclesiastical covenant. But we ought not to feel guilty about maintaining doctrinal integrity. Christian love and pastoral sensitivity do not require that we accept everyone's theological opinions within the CRC.

All of these suggestions recognize the legitimate concerns and insights of those who argue for inclusive language. But they do so in a way which is fully formed by biblical revelation, not by subjecting Scripture and God himself to the principle of gender equality.

CONCLUSION

It's time for the CRC officially to address inclusive language for God. It is an unavoidable issue that touches the very foundations of our faith. While the standard arguments for inclusive language are irreconcilable with the doctrine of Scripture and hermeneutical-theological methods acceptable in the Christian Reformed Church, there are biblically appropriate ways of referring to God as feminine and maternal. Figuratively speaking, God is "our mother." Feminine images from Scripture should be utilized by the church in its ministry within the framework of our confessionally orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. Thereby we would present both to the church and the world a well-crafted, culturally sensitive, biblical, and confessionally Reformed perspective on the confusing and highly emotional issue of inclusive language for God. ■

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with current resident.

MEDITATIONS

A PARABLE OF GRACE



Henry came to church because he needed to hear—no, really more than just hearing—he needed to experience some grace in his life. Friday night he had lost his temper again and yelled at his wife. The kids pretended not to hear. Yesterday morning his wife told him she was going to leave him. She had said it before but never done it, and he didn't know if she really would this time. Henry came to church alone.

Lila also needed some grace. Her boss at work was making advances to her and she hated it, but this was the best job she

church say if he stopped? How would he explain it to his kids? Saturday he had gone out to the dollar car wash to get ready for church. He was hoping after church to get a chance to talk to Brian about buying that old Pontiac.

Barb came to church with her husband, Jeff. Together they were still in shock from the news they got yesterday. Barb's mother in New Jersey had a heart attack. She was in intensive care. They didn't expect her to live. Barb was flying out Sunday afternoon, but she wanted to be in church in the morning. She had always needed grace to deal with her mother and now more than ever.

Everyone dressed up to go to church. Henry wore his dark blue suit with a paisley tie. Lila wore a dress that she didn't wear

to work anymore. Sheila wore the pantsuit she had worn earlier in the week for other purposes. Jake put on his brown sportcoat and a tie

with a lot of yellow in it. Barb wore her most sensible outfit for church because she also planned to wear it on the flight. No one could see anything wrong with this group.

It so happened this Sunday morning that they all landed in the same pew. Jake and his wife

and their two boys sat at the far end, near the wall. Then came Sheila, Lila, then Barb and Jeff, finally Henry on the inside aisle.

The service started with the minister asking them all to rise. He said, "Today is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it. Grace and peace to you from God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit." They started to sing number 440 in the gray psalter.

*Children of the heavenly father
safely in his bosom gather;
nestling bird nor star in heaven
such a refuge e'er was given.
God his own shall tend and
nourish; in his holy courts they
flourish. From all evil powers
he spares them; in his mighty
arms he bears them. Neither
life nor death shall ever from
the Lord his children sever; for
to them his grace revealing,
he turns sorrow into healing.
God has given, he has taken, but
his children ne'er forsaken;
his the loving purpose solely
to preserve them pure and holy.*

By the time they got to the last stanza, everyone in the pew except Jake and his family were in tears. They had come for a word of grace, and the heavenly choir that is a church, had given it to them. The songs, prayers, and the sermon centered around God's care.

And now the worshippers were on their ways home. Henry had resolved, again, to mend his ways, and this time even to look for some professional help. Lila decided to confront her boss and let the chips fall wherever. Sheila

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went to the pastor after the service and told him she really needed to talk. Barb pulled herself together and started to think of ways she could bless her mother. Jake looked for and found Brian. He didn't really want the car after all, but he thought maybe his son-in-law would. He would talk to him. On his way home Jake wondered why the people in his pew had wept during the service. He decided that some people are just strange.

Jake didn't think of himself as broken—or corrupt or perverse for that matter. He left church without any healing. The health have no need of a physician. Jake's weekly visits to the doctor's office ended in the waiting room. But the sick and the sinners gathered around Jesus, and he healed them all. ■



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ever had. She felt trapped.

Sheila came for some grace, too. She was lonely and drinking a lot again. Twice this week she went to a bar to pick up some guy just for a little company.

Jake just came to church. Every Sunday he came with his troops whether he needed it or not. What would his friends at