

# Is It Important What We Call God?

*Rise and Shine – July 15<sup>th</sup>*

## **Genesis 1:27**

*So God created humankind in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.*

The verse above lays out the fact that God created both man and woman in God's image. The word translated as 'he' and 'his' here, is the actual Hebrew word for 'they.' The verse could read "So God created humankind in their image..."

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*In the news*

## **Is God male? The Episcopal Church debates whether to change its Book of Common Prayer.**

The terms for God, in the poetic language of the prayers written for centuries, have almost always been male: Father. King. Lord. And in the Episcopal Church, the language of prayer matters. This week, the church is debating whether to overhaul that prayer book — in large part to make clear that God doesn't have a gender.

"As long as 'men' and 'God' are in the same category, our work toward equity will not just be incomplete. I honestly think it won't matter in some ways," said the Rev. Wil Gafney, a professor of the Hebrew Bible at Brite Divinity School in Texas who is on the committee recommending a change to the gendered language in the prayer book.

Gafney says that when she preaches, she sometimes changes the words of the Book of Common Prayer, even though Episcopal priests aren't formally allowed to do so. Sometimes she switches a word like "King" to a gender-neutral term like "Ruler" or "Creator." Sometimes she uses "She" instead of "He." Sometimes, she sticks with the masculine tradition. "'Our Father,' I won't fiddle with that," she said.

The leaders of the Episcopal Church will consider two dueling resolutions at their triennial convention, which begins Tuesday in Austin and runs through next week. One resolution calls for a major overhaul of the Book of Common

Prayer, which was last revised in 1979. A wholesale revision would take years, the church says, meaning a new prayer book wouldn't be in use until 2030.

The competing resolution says that the church should not update the Book of Common Prayer now and should instead spend the next three years intensively studying the existing book, which has its roots in the first Anglican prayer book, published under the same title in 1549.

That's what Chicago Bishop Jeffrey Lee advocates. Although he thinks that the church should focus more on mining what is in the 1979 book instead of revising it now, he said current events have shown him the importance of listening to women's demands for gender-neutral language. "In the culture, the whole #MeToo movement, I think, has really raised in sharp relief how much we do need to examine our assumptions about language and particularly the way we imagine God," he said. "If a language for God is exclusively male and a certain kind of image of what power means, it's certainly an incomplete picture of God. [...] We can't define God. We can say something profoundly true about God, but the mystery we dare to call God is always bigger than anything we can imagine."

In the decades since the 1979 prayer book, the Episcopal church has published numerous authorized alternative texts, which bishops can choose to let priests in their dioceses use alongside the Book of Common Prayer. Lee and other advocates of keeping the current prayer book say that these alternate service materials are sufficient, for now, for priests who want the option of gender-neutral texts.

If the wholesale revision of the prayer book does not pass at the convention, some feminist priests said they would push to at least grant broader authorization for priests to use the alternate texts — for instance, letting any priest use the newer texts, even without a bishop's approval.

"I have no doubt there are many, many, many other priests who are clutching pearls and collars in horror and would never change a word," Gafney said. But she argued that not changing the words of the Book of Common Prayer is harmful. That's the only book found in many Episcopal churches, and the book that a believer is likely to have at home for his or her personal spiritual resource. "As long as a masculine God remains at the top of the pyramid, nothing else we do matters. We construct a theological framework in which we talk about gender equality [...] then we say that which is most holy in the

universe is only and exclusively male. That just undoes some of the key theology that says we are equal in God's sight, we are fully created in God's image."

The Very Rev. Samuel Candler, who chairs the committee that will have the task of sending the prayer book resolution onto the larger legislative body or not, said he is personally in favor of revision, largely because of the need for non-gendered language. "It stands for something. It's a symbol of our common faith," he said. "The words in our prayer book do matter."

Other mainline Protestant denominations, including the United Methodist Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, have similarly debated the use of gendered language for God; the Reform Jewish movement updated its God language to gender-neutral terms when it replaced its 1975 prayer book with a new edition in 2007, and the Church of Sweden has recently asked leaders to refrain from using terms like 'Lord' and 'He' in favor of the less specific 'God.'

Kelly Brown Douglas, the canon theologian at Washington National Cathedral in the District and dean of Episcopal Divinity School at Union Theological Seminary, served on the committee recommending a change to gender-neutral language. She said that a revised Book of Common Prayer wouldn't just replace all the "Lord" with "Sovereign."

"God as Creator, Liberator, Sustainer. God as the one who loves. We use descriptive words for God, so that we can begin to imagine who God is in our world. That, to me, is the theological challenge, to get away from the static nouns that don't tell us anything anyway," she said. "The God that I can see in the least of these. The God that I can see in the face of a Renisha McBride or a Trayvon Martin — that tells me something about God."

The Bible, she said, includes more varied descriptors of God than the current Book of Common Prayer uses. "What about the God who heard? I'm talking about the God who heard the cries of the Israelites as they found themselves in bondage, the God who heard the oppressed. [...] The God whose voice comes through the whirlwind. Wow! Who is that God? That frees God from these very limited, finite images of God in which we are creating God in our own image instead of trying to live and reach into the image that is God."

### **Isaiah 66:13**

*As a mother comforts her child,  
so I will comfort you;  
you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.* (For context, read 13:1-13.)

In Chapter 66 of Isaiah, God is proclaimed all-powerful with heaven as his throne and earth as his footstool, before being compared to a woman giving birth (v. 7) and a mother comforting a child.

**Questions:** How do you picture God? Does seeing God as Father or Mother effect what traits you ascribe to God?

### **John 4:24**

*God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.* (For context, read 4:20-24.)

Though this verse of the fourth chapter of John begins with Jesus calling God 'Father,' he also refers to God as 'spirit.' On *Fox and Friends* Bishop Michael Curry recently referred to this verse saying "God is spirit. God is bigger than all our language."

**Questions:** Does it bother you when God is referred to as 'he'? 'She'? 'It'?

### **Matthew 28:19**

*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in<sup>[a]</sup> the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit* (no context needed.)

Here, Jesus refers to the trinitarian nature of our faith. Important to note: the Hebrew words translated here as 'father' and 'son' are both masculine, while the word for 'spirit' is feminine.

**Question:** If we believe that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – might we believe that God is both male and female?

### **Prayer for a Church Convention or Meeting** (BCP p.818)

Almighty and everliving God, source of all wisdom and understanding, be present with those who take counsel in this National Convention for the renewal and mission of your Church. Teach us in all things to seek first your honor and glory. Guide us to perceive what is right, and grant us both the courage to pursue it and the grace to accomplish it; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*