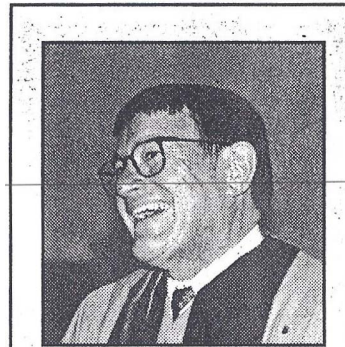


# The battle over biblical words for God

Jesus used very personal words to describe God, and most of all the masculine word: "Father." Jesus also used the feminine word "Mother" to describe his own feelings toward Jerusalem. (Matt 23:37) Ancient Israel gave to us the holy name for God, *Yahweh*, literally the Hebrew word "He is," and therefore God is described throughout scripture with the personal pronoun "he." *Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the lands! Serve the Lord with gladness! Come into his presence with singing! Know that the Lord is God! It is he that made us, and we are his...* (Psalm 100).

You may be aware that right now in parts of the Christian church a gender argument is underway about what constitutes proper God language. (I am not referring to concern for inclusive language in the word references to human beings in the Bible. All interpreters advocate for inclusive language in reference to human beings.) The gender argument I'm focussing on now has to do with the words we use for God.

Some argue that "Father" is too gender-specific and since there are folk who have had hurtful experiences with their own earthly fathers and since half of those who hear the words of faith are not men, therefore the church should avoid the word "father" and the pronoun "he" in our references to God. When this language limitation is followed, the result is the use of the word "God" exclusively in references to God or non-gender descriptions of God's acts such as "Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer..."



## From Your Pastor

Earl F. Palmer

I do not agree with this avoidance of the great biblical words for God as our Father, for two reasons:

One is a complaint from the poet in me who does not want to lose good and strong words. Beware of the loss of language; even when a word has been misused in other places! Because a rioter makes a peace sign and uses the word "peace" in a cynical way while breaking store windows does not mean

that a speaker or writer in the English language should avoid the word "peace." The word is too good for that.

The same is true of words like "man, woman, boy, girl, Lord, King." We should police the words that harm and we know instinctively what those are, but the words that at their core are grand and vast and good are needed for the poems we write and the prayers we say.

Avoidance of the great words of the Bible is devastating to poetry (try reading Psalm 100 with the word God substituted for each use of "he" by the Psalmist). Our Lord could not

describe his love for Jerusalem as the love of a mother hen toward her chicks. Politically corrected his sentence would read "I love Jerusalem like a chicken loves little chickens." The loss of great and good words produces nervous, sterile, self-conscious and stammering speech and prose.

But there is an even more important reason to continue calling God our Father, as Jesus did: The avoidance of words like father, mother, often amounts to the depersonalization of the character of God in our theology. God is then described procedurally and technically, but "tenacious personalism" (Telhard de Chardin's term) is fundamental to God's self revelation. "Father" affirms that intense and personal character of God in a way that "the Creator Sustainer Redeemer" does not. It is like avoiding the words "peace, love, joy, faith" because of bad uses in the language of people.

I would rather keep these words and teach our way through to their rich and full biblical meaning. Our Lord used the word "Father" for the prayer he taught us: "Pray then like this: Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name," (Matt 6:9) as well as the Triune blessing he gave to us, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19). It is an arrogant impertinence on our part that would now propose to avoid that word. It is far better to discover in this word the richness that Jesus has for us in the father who is better than any father we have ever known.