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Jesus' Paradigm for Relating Human Experience and Language about God

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The problem of theological language in worship has now become an issue debated even within individual congregations. It is no longer confined to secular academia or seminaries where the contemporary debate has been going on for some time. The most basic issues underlying the contemporary debate have been with us in the West at least since the time of Plato and Aristotle. It was central to the debates of the early church in dealing with Arianism and it surfaced in an obvious way in the medieval realist and nominalist controversy. In modern, Enlightenment, times it was Feuerbach who raised this problem so forcefully. However the root issues were already dealt with in the laws of ancient Israel. What we are going through now is an old problem in a contemporary form. How can we and how should we speak of God?

The present focus of debate falls on the use of gender related issues of language in reference to persons and to God. In this essay I would like to restrict discussion to the problem of our language about God which at this point in time centers on the issue of the use of gendered terms. I will also discuss how our approach to handling concerns of gendered language has enormous implications for our referring to God at all. I want to suggest that the biblical record of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 23:9 is crucial for this debate and that his teaching offers a radical alternative to the solution most often recommended today.¹

¹ See for example, Anne E. Carr, *Transforming Grace: Tradition and Women's Experience* (San Francisco, 1988); Rosemary Reuther, *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston, 1983); Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (London, 1983) and Mary Daly,

In fact, it is so distinct that it could be designated an alternative paradigm for understanding and resolving the issue of relating our language of God to our experience.

An Assumption and a Hermeneutical Paradigm

Most proposed solutions to the problem of 'traditional' speech about God and issues of sexism seem to be based on a common assumption made within a common paradigm to be used for relating human language to language about God. Masculine language about God is judged problematic because of the kinds of negative associations and even sinful experiences persons have suffered; poor relationships between women and their fathers being cited most often to make the point. This perspective was poignantly illustrated in a presbytery debate where a woman recounted a story of young girl whose father had deserted her and her mother. The conclusion of her argument for the proposed inclusive language policy (which was subsequently adopted) was that, by speaking and writing of God under these 'gender-inclusive and gendered balanced' guidelines, this girl could be spared from being led to think that God was like her unfaithful father and rather led to think that God was more like her mother. It was assumed that masculine language about God would only serve to tear at her wound and drive her away from the true God, and that, given her experience, feminine language would avoid this problem. The girl's experience of a faithless relationship with her father was assumed to be the determinative factor for her point of view and thus rendered masculine language of God unacceptable. At a more general level, it is often argued that it is the evil of patriarchy experienced throughout society at large which makes masculine language problematic for many.

Having such an experience with a father or other male authority figure is assumed to have such a powerful and unchangeable character that it serves as a permanent lens through which all talk of God must be interpreted. Such negative experiences are judged to distort permanently any concept of God whenever it is communicated in language which an individual might associate with that painful experience. Thus, for those who have had painful experiences with men, masculine words, images or concepts could only serve to distort communication about God. It is this assumption of the determinative quality of such painful experiences which underlies

most contemporary demands for a change in the language of our worship, prayer and theology.

The assumption regarding the power of past experience to play the determinative role in any subsequent approach to God itself has a deeper assumption upon which it is built. The conditioning force of past experience can be assumed to have determinative power only when the much more comprehensive assumption is made that no other influence can be greater. This assumption is rarely if ever articulated much less debated, but is clearly required to sustain the more obvious assumption. These two assumptions together form the basis for most contemporary arguments for changing how we speak of God.

These assumptions have coalesced into the establishment of a norm for approaching the problem of relating our experience to language about God, which we will call a paradigm. This paradigm stipulates how to solve the problem of the proper relationship between our language about God and our experiences in the human created realm. It seems to assert this: whenever our human experience might misconstrue our understanding of our language about God, our theology and liturgy ought to be adjusted to accommodate it, since it is our experience which is fixed and unchangeable. Our theology and liturgy should be relativized in the light of our experience.

The assumption of the determinative power of past experience is thereby conjoined with a normative or paradigmatic approach to relating our experience and speech about God. The often hidden assumption of a determinative power for our experiences is thus codified through the prescription of a particular hermeneutical paradigm which tells us we ought to move from our experiences, which serve as incorrigible criteria, to our interpretation of any proper reference to God.²

The argument runs: since such painful experiences are irremediable, therefore we can only act and speak in terms of our past experiences, even or especially when it comes to speaking of God. Since there is no other possibility, therefore we ought to condition our language about God by our experiences. To recommend an alternative, in this framework, is regarded both as a delusion and as cruel.

This paradigm assumes and legitimizes the sovereignty of a given individual's experience for formulating speech about God. Consequently, we will designate this pervasive contemporary orientation to the problem as the anthropocentric paradigm.

² The Freudian and perhaps Marxist overtones of this argument deserve treatment although we will not take it up here.

A Shared Concern, but a Faithful and Compassionate Alternative

Although I think we must question the assumptions and the interpretive paradigm which follows in such arguments, I want to acknowledge one thing first. There is a real problem here and a real call for a responsible decision regarding language. The fact that many women have been shamefully treated by their biological fathers or other male authorities must be acknowledged and we must anticipate that such experiences will indeed have implications for their spiritual journey towards God. Such faithless relationships do present serious obstacles to the comprehension of God's true character. A false witness is a lie against God and for those who have been subjected to such distortions there will be serious pastoral implications which should not be minimized.

The reason I raise the question about the anthropocentric paradigm is not to ignore or deny the experience of such persons, but because I believe that the assumptions are false and that this paradigm will not, in the end, be truly helpful to those very persons who have been injured.

First, I want to present an alternative way to relate our experience and language about God based on the example and teaching of Jesus. My second concern is to demonstrate that if we follow the now predominant anthropocentric paradigm we may perhaps avoid the further irritation of people's wounds, but we will leave them still bleeding and unhealed in their experience, and captive of it. Consequently, they will be defenseless against further abuse and perhaps liable to pass it on to others. But thirdly, and worse yet, the anthropocentric paradigm leaves all of us without any reason or hope of having any valid knowledge of God. It is a self-defeating hermeneutic which calls into question not only gendered language about God but *all* language about God. This solution invalidates all theological statements which purport to refer to God, not just masculine language. In sum, I want to argue that true compassion for those used and abused calls for a different solution which holds out the possibility of freedom from the domination of past injury and also a freedom from mere self-projection thus opening a way to a true and healing knowledge of God and renewed relationships with others.

Jesus' Paradigm, Assumption and Compassion

The passage in Matthew 23:1–12 is an interesting one to consider in the light of the issue of language about God, even gendered language about God. In this context, Jesus criticizes the scribes and Pharisees

of his day for being hypocritical spiritual leaders of the people. 'They bind heavy burdens hard to bear . . . but they themselves will not move them with their finger' (v. 4). Here Jesus is concerned that what they do betrays who God is. They misrepresent God in their actions and set up obstacles to people's grasping God's true character. This is a situation very much like we see today when, as is most often pointed out, biological fathers are unfaithful in their responsibility to rightly reflect God's character in their own parenting. Jesus sees and acknowledges that our experience of another person's behavior can indeed create obstacles to our trust in God. There can be a great distortion of the truth of God as it comes to be reflected in human relations.

However, Jesus' solution works in exactly the opposite direction than the one most often urged upon us today. Rather than adjusting our language of God to our experience of human relations, Jesus directs us to change our language about human relations in the light of our language about God. Jesus tells them: 'you are not to be called Rabbi, Master, Father' and the reason he gives is because ultimately there is but One Teacher, Master, and Father, namely, God. If human beings have betrayed the true meaning of these names, it is human beings who should be deprived of their assumption of the names, not God.

Jesus relativizes the language about persons in terms of language about God, not vice versa. If Jesus were to follow the contemporary paradigm he would have insisted that they not call him Teacher, that they not call God Father, nor Master. For Jesus, the solution to the unfaithfulness of human witness to the true character of God was to reverse the direction of adaptation. We must adapt our language about our human experiences to the language about God given to us by Jesus Christ.³ If human persons are unfaithful to their calling to represent the fatherhood of God, the title should be revoked from them, not God.

Furthermore, although he did recognize a real influence of others upon us which constituted a genuine obstacle to faith, Jesus did not assume that our experience has determinative power to condition our knowledge of God. Rather he assumed that there is a greater influence which can reach into our lives with the power to set us free

³ Thus, although God does 'adapt' his truth to us that we might grasp it, we, too, are called to adapt our thought and language to God's adaptation to us in Christ. Otherwise, there would be no revelation at all, and there certainly would never be repentance or *metanoia*, a radical change of mind about God. If God's adaptation to us was absolute this would then amount merely to a confirmation of us as we are and as we think; it would make unnecessary not only any change on our part but any need for a revealing or justifying act of God in the first place.

from the prison of ourselves and our past. He assumed the determinative power of God's grace by the Holy Spirit to be sovereign over us. Consequently, when it came to speaking faithfully of God, his greatest concern was not to avoid using words or concepts which might possibly be associated with unfaithful human relationships. Rather, he continued to use humanly misused terms such as Father, Master and Lord for God, assuming that the true word about God would judge and overcome any misrepresentation in their human relationships. Here he commands his listeners to do just this.

Finally, we can assume that it was the same compassion manifest everywhere else in his ministry that led him to direct us to this paradigm rather than the other. For Jesus true reconciliation and healing can be found only when we first use language that is faithful to God and secondly, let this shed light on all other usages, faithful or unfaithful. The true original word is to be used to interpret all its representations. Jesus' teaching thus orders the direction of the hermeneutical task. We will designate this approach the theocentric paradigm for relating human experience and speech about God.⁴

The problem which human unfaithfulness poses for our ability to talk about God faithfully is not new. Jesus acknowledged it in the first century AD, the passage above being a prime example.⁵ Persons in human history from beginning to end have experienced the wrenching pain of human unfaithfulness in the most intimate of relations. Given the universal experience of the human failure of fathers (and everyone else) to faithfully represent God, it is curious that it has taken this long for the demand to minimize or eliminate (at least for some persons) masculine speech about God to become so insistent and widespread.

The problem of human unfaithfulness and language about God has been recognized throughout the history of religious and philosophical reflection. From Jesus' time onwards the church has

⁴ We could have called this the christocentric paradigm, but that might have been misleading for some. The revelation of the whole triune God was focused in the person and life of the Son of God incarnate. However, the Son reveals the Father and sends us the Spirit. Thus, a christocentrism, while proper, leads to a trinitarian theocentrism, and not to a so called christo-monism. In an orthodox trinitarian frame, calling it a christocentric paradigm would have the value of indicating that the demand to have to choose between a theology 'from above' or 'from below' presents a false dichotomy. Strictly speaking, then, it is this *trinitarian* theocentrism to which we refer.

⁵ When Jesus asks the question 'Why do you call me good?' (Mark 10:18) the same issue is involved. On what basis will they form their definitions?

had been consciously wrestling with it.⁶ What is new is the prescribed solution to it and the two assumptions brought together and made prior to our approach to the perennial problem of language about God.

Unfortunately in the contemporary phase of this debate the assumption about the incorrigibility of past personal experience is seldom questioned. However, the force of the argument rests entirely upon it. If they are false, the proposed anthropocentric solution loses its ground. The assumption is called into question by the fact that Jesus' teaching assumes the opposite, namely that the truth of God as presented in and by him has the power to reorient us to it. Thus the anthropocentric assumption cannot stand as the only option within the framework of Christian faith.

Furthermore, those who reject the presently reigning anthropocentric solution have often been accused of denying the human problem and pain and even of perpetuating it. However, to insist that any alternative must be a cruel one, also runs into the obstacle that Jesus' theocentric solution arises out of his full sympathy with those spiritually harmed by those he himself criticizes. Our approach must do no less.

True Compassion: Beyond Sympathy to Healing

Perhaps a few words about the nature of Jesus' compassion will clarify the true nature of his solution compared to the contemporary one. It seems that Jesus' compassion involved a concern that went beyond merely helping people avoid more immediate pain. In fact,

⁶ Athanasius' fourth century debate with Arius involves the same rival assumptions and hermeneutical paradigms. Do we call God Father on the basis of our experience of human fatherhood, or on the basis of Jesus' own sonship? Do we call God Father because God is like us, one member of the class of beings called fathers, or do we refer to ourselves as fathers because God is first of all the Father of Jesus Christ and so we too may bear witness to that original, true and faithful Fatherhood in some of our own relationships? Athanasius was clear that we name God according to the revelation in the Son, not according to our human experience. The alternatives for him were mythology and idolatry (Athanasius, *De Synodis*, 42, in Philip Schaff (ed.), *Athanasius: Select Writings and Letters*, in *NPNF*, second series, 4, New York, 1892, 472. See also Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 386ff.). Behind Athanasius' thought lies the patristic recognition of the apophatic nature of theological statements. It anticipated the classical formulation that no reference to God can be regarded as *univocal*. That is, no word proper to human experience (such as 'good', 'wise', 'present', 'alive' etc.) can be said to be attributed to God in the exactly same way. But there are words which are not *equivocal* (have no proper reference to God) but are properly *analogical* (are first true of God and then are in a derived way appropriate to human existence).

he made it clear to those who followed him that certain kinds of suffering were intrinsic to his call. They would have to lose their lives (Mk. 8:35), cut certain things out of their lives (Mt. 5:29) , and suffer persecution (Mk. 10:30). Jesus did not spare people's false pride, but rather exposed it, all the while preserving their true integrity. Even those caught in the most shameful situations were not spared his straightforward evaluation of their behavior and given a warning ('Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more' Jn. 8:11). Yet he would preserve them from any self-righteous condemnation. Jesus would not condone wrong to spare people's feelings (ego's), but rather did everything to spare their lives for God. And that's the point. Jesus, as a faithful incarnate representative of God, was moved by his own compassion to lead people to full life in him even if this meant exposing a wound, either self-inflicted or caused by others. Healing for the first called for the pain of repentance; the second required the agony of giving forgiveness. Jesus would not limit his compassion to a kindness which would allow the avoidance of the additional pain of forgiveness or repentance, but rather pursued people's full restoration from the wound of the past by means of telling them to repent and forgive.⁷

Let me venture to draw out how the dynamic of Jesus' compassion calls for an alternative paradigm for speaking about God in painful situations. Those who have been sinned against have not only been betrayed on a human level, but also on a spiritual level. Human relationships when distorted and broken are themselves a source of pain. But beyond that, God's true character is obscured by that human sin. The severity of the wound inflicted cannot be assessed merely by an analysis of the particular act of unfaithfulness exhibited and the immediate pain experienced. It can be fully grasped only by perceiving the deeper wounding which involves the defacement of the image of God entrusted to, say, a father. The gift of human fatherhood is a God-given trust meant to bear witness to God's love for his Son and their love for us in him. Its purpose is to be a means to lead others to trust in God's love.

Such human failure tempts people to misunderstand or mistrust the living God. That this is especially true in the context of the family is underscored in the special biblical commands, warnings and promised blessings directed to parent-child relationships. The victims of such treatment are robbed of a true witness to the character of God, a responsibility uniquely entrusted to that one person. Such

⁷ Of course Jesus' own suffering on our behalf demonstrates the true depth of the Father and Son's love for humanity and all creation.

unfaithfulness disrupts the child's relationship with God, leading them into temptation to not trust God.

If earthly fathers have betrayed that God-given task not only is the human relationship broken but the God-relationship is at least threatened if not broken. Thus, it too, must be restored if full healing is to be accomplished. The question arises as to what could possibly replace the false witness implanted in a child's heart? On the human plane only a true witness by another could possibly serve, but this has its limitations. Persons only have one earthly father, and a subsequent experience cannot of itself become a norm, but only an additional experience which may at most relativize the former unfaithfulness. Full restoration must, then, involve a reappréhension of the true fatherhood which invites a renewed trust in God. Without this deeper dimension of reconciliation all other healing remains relatively superficial and leaves the person vulnerable to further harm. The deepest healing is required *at the wound*. Only a true witness to the character of God could bring this about. Full restoration for such a person would certainly involve a healing in both dimensions but it must essentially involve the restored knowledge of true fatherhood.

This explains Jesus' response. The leaders have been unfaithful in their witness to the character of the true God. They have abused people by misrepresenting in themselves the reality behind the titles Master, Rabbi and Father. However, these words, in Jesus' view, cannot be thrown out of the theological dictionary. Their degradation calls for their restoration. Their true meaning must be restored by reference to God, for God is the norm by which to grasp the true meaning of these words.⁸ To cease speaking of the fatherhood of God because of human unfaithfulness would avoid reminding someone of their pain, but such a strategy precludes the possibility of the renewal of their grasp of the character of God at the very point at which it is most distorted. Out of his compassion, Jesus' primary concern is to have their knowledge of God's true character restored at the very point where pain and deception were experienced.

⁸ In several notable cases it has become obvious that New Testament authors had to wrestle with the selection and meaning of certain words to convey the unique revelatory meaning of their message. The words and meanings of love (*agape*), fellowship/participation (*koinonia*), truth (*aletheia*), and even Messiah are clear examples. The first four centuries of theological reflection, which came to be summarized in the statements of the Ecumenical Councils, could be characterized as essentially discovering, defining and redefining within the Greek philosophical framework key terminology adequate to the Christian revelation: eg. 'being', 'person', 'nature', 'substance', and coordinating their meanings in at least two languages, Latin and Greek.

This dynamic has been born out many times in my own ministry. I have had a number of persons (men and women) testify that their own restoration at the deepest level came when they discovered that they did have a faithful father, after all, in the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Proclamation of the true father-character of God did not prove to be an unsurmountable obstacle to approaching God, but was vital to their healing.⁹

⁹ This essay is essentially about ascertaining the proper relationship between our experience and language about God in general. It argues that at their intersection the biblical content should serve as the criteria to regulate our usage. However, it primarily makes use of a particular instance of the problem: namely the problem of speaking of God as Father.

This particular issue was chosen because of the contemporary concern and the biblical parallel in Mt. 23. The force of the argument, as it relates to the particular title 'Father', leads to the conclusion that it is theologically and pastorally crucial to maintain this particular designation, and a proper understanding of it, for God. It cannot and should not be minimized or eliminated.

This argument does not directly address the issue of the propriety of addressing God additionally with feminine pronouns or as 'She' or 'Mother'. However, its conclusion indicates that if we are to avoid mythologizing or idolatry and benefit from the revelational content of Scripture, then our usage and practice should follow the biblical pattern of usage centered in Jesus Christ.

Thus, the determination of whether God should be addressed as 'She' or 'Mother' or with feminine pronouns would require a comparative analysis of the various ways in which God is addressed in the biblical material, especially as given to us by Jesus in addressing God as Father and explicitly instructing his disciples to do so as well (Mt. 6:9). This has been expertly done by a number of persons (see below.).

The conclusions of those studies and my own work are that certain aspects of God's character are indeed *illustrated* by a few but nevertheless explicit associations with the exclusively feminine attribute of motherhood (Is. 42:14;45:10;49:15;66:13. See also Dt. 32:11; Is 31:5; Ho. 13:8; and Mt. 23:37). These comparisons are made exclusively through the figure of simile ('God is like a . . .') and not through the use of metaphor or by names of address which make for much stronger and direct comparison. The numerous metaphorical and vocative usages are reserved for fathering and the name Father. God is said to be the father of Israel and is called by name Father. By contrast God is never said to be a mother and is never addressed as She. This should determine our usage.

Nevertheless, if the feminine-like comparisons and characteristics of God have been neglected in the church's preaching and worship, as I am inclined to think they have, then it is appropriate to see that they are properly noted so as to faithfully reflect the biblical witness to the fullness of God's character. Reference to certain aspects of God's character which could be compared to those we might associate with the feminine go far beyond those limited to the explicitly feminine ones such as motherhood. Conveying this fullness will be helpful to those who may think that God is somehow essentially male or masculine.

However, since God is never addressed as 'Mother' or 'She', our doing so would be quite a different matter and crucially misleading. Further exploration as to why this might be so is beyond the scope of this essay, but may be explored by the reader elsewhere. See my 'Speaking of God', *Religious and Theological Studies Fellowship Bulletin*, 7, April/May, 1995, 10-13,23. Also the essays 'Exchanging

Two Further Dimensions of Healing: Forgiveness with Discernment and Stronger Defences against Abuse and Abusing

But faithful speech about God, in the face of human failure, brings with it the possibility of another dimension of healing. On the horizontal plane of relationships an understanding of the nature of abuse seems to contribute to the healing process involving both forgiveness and a growing capacity to avoid, where possible, future abuse. Human sin involves in large part deceit, not just immediate harm. A crucial aspect of evil is its power to call into question the victim's ability to discern the truth, to undermine a person's trust in their own capacity to judge good from evil. It is well documented that a frequent response to abuse is for the victim to blame him/herself. In my own ministry I have found persons to be amazingly resistant to acknowledging mistreatment by others, especially parents. Such persons experience a profound inner turmoil and confusion when betrayed by an intimate. This often produces a further lack of confidence in their own powers of discernment, even in matters of their own experience! The persons who have wronged them often appear to them, at worst as blameless monsters or, at best, as huge unanswerable question marks, leaving them in fear and anger, which they sometimes direct at themselves.

Abused persons arrive at a significant turning point when they come to see clearly what parents or others did both faithfully and unfaithfully. The clear presentation of true love and service in Christ's revelation of his heavenly Father serves to provide the norm, the light, by which to discern the true state of affairs in one's own experience. Coming to such a place is indeed painful. However, it leads to a greater clarity about the true character of their relationships and this in turn opens a door to the offering of genuine forgiveness. Forgiveness and a sober honest recognition as to how and when one was abused seem to be often linked. A deep forgiveness may follow upon the clear identity of the evil experienced (even if anger interposes itself first). And forgiveness, following the NT teaching, is crucial to our restoration. Forgiving another calls for the acknowledgement of the sin and not only leads to healing the

God for 'No Gods': A Discussion of Female Language for God' by Elizabeth Achtemeier; 'Language for God and Feminist Language: Problems and Principles' by Roland Frye; and 'The Gender of God and the Theology of Metaphor' by Garret Green, all in Alvin F. Kimel, Jr. (ed.), *Speaking the Christian God* (Grand Rapids and Leominster, 1992).

relationship but also leads to a cleansing of the pollution of deceit and the subsequent insecurity it breeds. The deception is broken and the evil nature of the the wrong is exposed for what it is.

The light of a norm beyond one's past experience brings a restored power of discernment. Gaining a clear grasp of the nature of the evil done strengthens their capacity to recognize and avoid being abused in the same way again.

A crucial element in the process of healing involves the person grasping clear criteria for recognizing wrong behavior when directed against them by persons close to them. Their own broken experiences cannot serve as the norm, but a reappréhension of the truth of God in Christ can. In the light of this norm persons can better evaluate the treatment they are receiving from others and take measures to minimize or avoid that which they have come to recognize as harmful. And it does so in a way that mere anger and unforgiveness can never provide. In this way they can overcome their fear of remaining a victim and take some responsibility for the maintenance of their own health.

Such discernment of healthy relationships will also contribute to a person's resistance to passing on any harmful behavior to their own children or others. And, as numerous studies show, persons abused are those most likely to abuse their own children.

Jesus' insistence that those who have been harmed by the mistreatment of others should look to their God for a true grasp of the normative pattern for our relationships arises from his compassion. He assumes that there is a possibility for us to transcend our own experience graciously granted to us by God through Christ. This self transcendence is necessary if our broken relationships with God are to be restored, if persons are to have the possibility of extending forgiveness to others, to avoid being further abused and also to escape passing on abusive patterns of behavior. If persons are left with only the painful experiences of fatherhood and are denied access to a positive and true pattern of relating, then healing can only be delayed. Surely, hopelessness about their own capacity to be any more faithful than their own parents will threaten to overwhelm them.

Jesus cannot leave them confined within the walls of their own broken experience and so calls them out of their own immediate experiences to grasp a greater truth that sheds light on their experience. The paradigm of Jesus' solution is that we are not to interpret God in terms of our previous experience understood apart from Christ, but are to interpret our experience in terms of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. It is on the basis of our grasp of the true fatherhood of God that we can most clearly discern the

normative pattern by which to evaluate and conduct our relationships.

Furthermore, this is a call for people to resist the contemporary skepticism which assumes our experiences and their prima facie interpretations are permanently and necessarily determinative for our perspective on life and thereby denies the possibility of any growth beyond them. If we are to be true to the Gospel we must present an alternative and opposite paradigm. Who we are is not essentially determined by our past experience understood apart from God in Christ, but is determined by the grace of God in Christ. Thus ultimately we are to interpret our own experience in the light of that grace made visible in the relationship of the the Father and Son in the Spirit. True compassion and hope for the healing of others cannot settle for anything less than this if it is to be reflective of the compassion of Jesus.

A Few Implications for Ministry in a Changing Context

The implication of such a proper theology is not that we force people at all times and places to blindly speak of God as Father, Rather, we should continually encourage persons to struggle with the meaning of God's own fatherhood as a crucial element leading toward their own healing. It is important to recognize the shifting cultural context away from masculine reference to God I believe it signals in part the legitimate rejection of a distorted and unfaithful human masculinity. Ultimately what is needed is a restoration in idea and practice of a true redeemed human masculinity. Such will not be a threat to true human femininity but rather a blessing.

But how will we get there? I can only say a few things here. When dealing with those new to Christian faith who come with a negative bias towards the masculine, it would not be advisable to start with an announcement of an obligation to call God 'Father'. We may, of course, begin by having them address God as merely 'God'. From there the true full character of God must be uncovered and explored as it is revealed in God's relationship with Israel and especially in the relationship of the incarnate Son with his heavenly Father as depicted in the New Testament. Where we can see true fatherhood and sonship being lived out is in the relationship Jesus had with his heavenly Father. People need to have the particulars of this glorious relationship narrated for them. The exposition of Jesus' treatment of women would also be especially important in this connection. This process may continue with initiates by perhaps speaking of 'the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ', or qualifying our address by saying 'Our heavenly Father' thus preserving the unique, normative, and

prior fatherhood of God over our human experience of fatherhood. In a pastoral situation it may be advisable to encourage persons to duly note the unfaithfulness of a human father or the betrayal of masculinity in a given situation by way of comparison with God's true fatherly care.

Ultimately, however, the issue cannot and should not be avoided. We can expect great difficulty in dealing with those who wish to address God as She or who refuse to call God Father. There can be no short-cuts. Demonstrating how and in what way it is essential in the end to come to recognize God as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and why we are baptized in the Triune Name must become a matter of Christian maturity. Ultimately, the cultural shift unavoidably demands the additional theological education of our congregations as to why we address God as Father at all, and what we mean by it. We must show that we do so because he is the Father of the Son of God and because our speech about God is not derived from ourselves but rather our speech about ourselves is derived and interpreted in terms of God's truth and reality. How and why this is also compassionate and helpful is the burden of part of this essay. We will no longer be able to assume a proper understanding and acceptance of this way of addressing God.

Furthermore, we will have to make explicit the fact that God is not a sexual being, although up till now, in general, this could be assumed. Many who argue against Christianity in general and against its masculine religious language in particular have asserted that what is meant by such language is that God is male, even though God's being a sexual being always has been denied and never affirmed. People will have to be led, instructed and encouraged to take on a proper biblical way of speaking of God.¹⁰ Our theology will

¹⁰ Another issue, far beyond the scope of this essay, is whether persons who are female can relate to the God revealed in Jesus Christ. On the basis of this essay we can point out that the primary issue is not whether men or women can relate to God, but whether God can and has related to us. To insist that the most important question is whether God is like me is to assume the anthropocentric orientation. Its result can only be the projection of God according to our own individual images. Females would be led to create a god(dess) which would justify themselves as they are, and men would do the same. If the anthropocentric paradigm is all that is possible, then both would be justified in doing so and neither could call the other into question.

However, out of the theocentric and Christocentric orientation we first see that God through the Son, the Word, creates male and female for the purpose of imaging God in Christ. As their creator, God knows the humanly feminine and masculine. God created them and their relation for a good purpose, to be a complementary channel of blessing to each other and to give glory to God. That is, men and women, in right relationship, are to be in their relations creaturely reflections of the fulness of the character of the triune relations within the

have to be decidedly and explicitly more trinitarian. It will also have to be much more theological rather than anthropological, explicitly distinguishing it more deliberately from all mythologizing and other systems of self-projection and self-justification. It will be our burden to demonstrate what exactly is at stake if we refuse to follow the biblical pattern and assert alien patterns in our language and liturgy. For the implications of our assumptions and paradigms for relating language and experience go far beyond the concerns of Christian theological method or even of Christian ministry we have so far considered.

The Self-Defeating Nature of the Anthropocentric Assumption and Paradigm

Up to this point we have been considering how Jesus' directive for us to maintain faithful language about God as Father is compassionate because it leads to a reconciliation with God and with others, and brings a healing in one's self. However, much more than this is at stake if the theocentric paradigm is rejected. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the Gospel itself is at stake. Consider this. If indeed our

Godhead. Masculinity and femininity provide a foundation, not an obstacle, for relationship to God and each other. As such they are not separate and unrelated realities but exist only in and for relationship with each other in God. While God is not a sexual being, it is more proper to say that God's character is 'genderful', rather than 'genderless'. See my 'The Grammar of Barth's Theology of Personal Relations' *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 47/2, 183-222.

God in Christ and by the Spirit also reconciles male and female to himself and to each other. This has been accomplished in God's identification with us in our humanity by way of the incarnation and crucifixion. If Jesus were neither male nor female, or both, his existence would have been alien to ours altogether, because in our humanity we are particularly one or the other as he was. God in Christ can and has identified with us in a reconciling way. We, in turn, may identify with God through Christ at the level of our humanity, a humanity that is shared by men and women.

Through creation in Christ and the incarnation of the Son we learn that the differences between God and humanity and between male and female do not constitute separate and unrelatable realities. On the contrary humans have their existence, their life, by being covenantally related to God and each other. We were created and reconciled for relationship with God in Christ and for right relationship between women and men. Recall the Apostle Paul's admonition, 'Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God.' (1 Cor. 11:11,12. Cf. Gal 3:28.).

In Christ the differences are not a threat to love and understanding but serve as a good foundation for right relationship which may image/reflect the glory of God. God can and has identified himself with us in Christ through creation and reconciliation. The only question is whether we will meet and know God where he has met and known us.

understanding of God is determined (not merely influenced in a way that could eventually be overcome by grace) by our experiences of human relationships then the question arises, on what basis could there ever be any true knowledge of God, any true worship of God?

The anthropocentric paradigm is grounded on an apprehension of human limitations and problems. It assumes that we are influenced by our experience. Well enough. But when such influence is assumed to be determinative for all subsequent experience then it has the effect of relativizing or even eliminating a confidence in God's own ability to break into our experience to enable us to distinguish between the faithfulness of God and faithlessness of human persons. What must be pointed out is that while the anthropocentric paradigm begins with a recognition of human limitation it entails an assertion also of what God can and cannot do. God is rendered impotent in the sight of our limitations. This constitutes the denial of the efficacy of the grace of God. Jesus' intention to make the Father known as he knows the Father, to those to whom he chooses, is nullified by such a paradigm. God's own purposes in Christ are thereby essentially circumscribed by human sin. There can be no overcoming of evil by God's good in this framework. Human sin obliterates our apprehension of God's character and thus it serves as the most fundamental reality which orients how we think and speak of God. What begins as a humble concern about our own limitations turns out to constitute a powerful assertion about the impotence of God.

The anthropocentric paradigm also entails that it is not just our language about the fatherhood of God that is rendered useless, but that *all* our language about God is irrelevant and misleading. If the brokenness of a relationship with a father rules out the possibility of knowing God in terms of fatherhood, then we must ask, What unbroken relationships are capable of use for our knowledge of God? All our relationships are broken to some degree even if we prefer one over another. All our knowledge of God in this paradigm becomes problematic, because it is all essentially reduced to an unavoidable projection of our own experiences on a cosmic screen.¹¹ Our broken experiences serve to disqualify all our talk about God. Once we have eliminated all language which offends anyone in the church on the basis of their experience of some human relationship, what would be left? Do we have undistorted and perfectly faithful relationships with

¹¹ This is, of course, the exact claim of Ludwig Feuerbach (*The Essence of Christianity*, 1841 and *The Essence of Religion*, 1851). He marks the involution of theology into anthropology. His conclusions can be seen as the working out of the religious skepticism reaching back to Hume and Kant.

our mothers, our brothers or sisters, our legislators, our ministers, our lovers, our employers, our computers, our . . . ? Language about God would have to become more and more abstract and impersonal to avoid its association with any of our broken relationships. But then language of God would have been forced to the meaningless margins of our lives. Alternatively we could substantially shift our thinking regarding the significance of our 'God-talk' thereby reducing it to represent mere projections of ourselves. In either case the anthropocentric paradigm condemns us to being mythologizers and idolater who have no meaningful or valid language by which to know God and/or leaves us consigned to hopelessly projecting ourselves out of the brokenness of our relationships, unhealed.

The anthropocentric assumption and paradigm asserts that all our language about God, including Christ's own language, is merely culturally or psychologically determined mythological projection. It denies the possibility of obeying the commands neither to make graven images of God nor to use God's name in vain.¹² It must construe Jesus himself as just another idolater or mythologizer of his day. We can be no more. There is no room for the Gospel of grace here, the anthropocentric paradigm has excluded it from the outset. This is the deepest reason that Jesus rejects the solution of relativizing our language about God to our experience. To deny that this is possible and right is to deny the grace of God and to make our experience of evil sovereign. It is to make an idol of our broken experiences and thereby enslave us to them for eternity. It renders all our talk of God idolatry, mythology.

Thus the anthropocentric paradigm is not merely an argument against calling God Father, but is essentially an argument against the Christian faith as a whole, and further, a denial of the possible truth of any religion at all.¹³ All religious claims are thereby reduced to

¹² Exodus 20. Indeed, the recognition both that human beings are indeed inveterate mythologizers and that there is held out for us a gracious possibility and obligation for us to not be idolaters who make God in our own image is enshrined in the Decalogue of ancient Israel as well as the New Testament, e.g. Paul's warning about those who exchange the glory of the immortal God for the image of some aspect of creation (Rom. 1:22-25). The awareness of the human propensity to project out of its own subjectivity is not a new insight, but an ancient one. Even Plato rejected the pantheon of Greek gods on this basis.

¹³ And indeed, there are those who argue for some kind of post Christian religion, or for goddess worship. Most notable is Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father, Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston, 1973) But also see Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford, 1990); Rosemary Reuther, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston, 1983); and Carol Christ, in her chapter 'Symbols of Goddess and God in Feminist Theology' in Carl Olsen (ed.), *The Book of the Goddess Past and Present: An introduction to Her Religion*, (New York, 1983).

psychological or sociologically based mythologies, none having any validity beyond its own bald assertions.

What alternative does Jesus offer us?—a life of exposing *all* our language and every one of our relationships to the light of the holiness revealed in the relationship of Jesus with his heavenly Father by the Spirit. All our language and experiences must be relativized, be reinterpreted, in the light of a norm that has come to us from beyond our immediate past experience. A mental and emotional repentance on our part is called for at every turn. This is a crucial aspect of our dying to ourselves in order to follow Jesus. The false sovereignty of our own experience must be overthrown in the power of the Gospel. This is the theological task of the church in its teaching and preaching. There are no words or concepts in any language or culture which need no reinterpretation in the light of the Gospel. It all must come under judgment. The true meaning of love, justice, holiness, reconciliation, faithfulness, goodness, of being persons, being human, being masculine or feminine, etc. can be discerned only in the light of the Gospel. This is always a painful process, and yet is the only way forward to the healing of our relationships with God and with each other. All our language, not just gendered language, is broken and needs healing. Jesus calls us all to the same task, we are all under this gracious burden. This possibility is not a human one apart from the gracious action of God, it is the possibility of God given to us in his Word and by his Spirit.¹⁴

The theocentric alternative is altogether excluded by the presently promoted anthropocentric paradigm of how to relate our experience to our speaking of God. This is the ultimate reason why it must be rejected. It is God's grace which is sovereign not my broken experience. It is God's grace alone which calls us out of our brokenness and refuses to leave us deceived about the unfaithfulness of human persons and the faithfulness of God. It is God's grace which calls us to repent of our sin-conditioned grasp of God, even when it is conditioned by the sin of others against us. The anthropocentric paradigm, built on seemingly self-evident assumptions

What is still not widely recognized is that their critique of Christianity ultimately nullifies the truthfulness or normativity of any religion whatsoever. All religion becomes merely self projection. And of course, if this is so, then *all* religion is, on the one hand, intrinsically self worship, equally valid, and already self-justified (and therefore in no need of reformation/justification), or, on the other, is all self-deceit and therefore ought to be rejected in every form altogether.

¹⁴ The most comprehensive and helpful source I am aware of for critical discussions on the theological issues involved in language about God, especially in light of the challenges of feminism, is Alvin F. Kimel, Jr. (ed.), *Speaking the Christian God. The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* (Grand Rapids, 1992).

and allegedly promoted on the basis of compassion, actually constitutes a denial of the sovereign grace of God and leaves persons enslaved to themselves, their diminished comprehension of God, and enslaved to their brokenness. The theocentric paradigm in Jesus' teaching demonstrates a true compassion which refuses to be restricted to mere kindness and demonstrates the truth of the surpassing power of the Gospel to reach and transform us that we might enter into the healing of our apprehension of God and our broken relationships.

Conclusion

Ultimately, there are two opposite alternatives for relating our experience to our language of God with radically different assumptions—the anthropocentric and theocentric paradigms. We stand at a crisis point. We will all have to determine which paradigm is the more compassionate, which embodies the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Will we cease to call people to wrestle with the meaning of the fatherhood of God and concede to the assumption of the determinative and incorrigible nature of our painful experiences which thereby have the effect of insulating us even from God's own working? Or, will we cease to give the name of father to those who were unfaithful to their calling and resist the temptation to allow those experiences to define for us the meaning of fatherhood? Will we open ourselves up to receiving the healing that comes in letting God fill his Name with the meaning of the fatherhood revealed in Christ and delivered to us in the Gospel by the Spirit?

Abstract

The essay provides sustained theological reflection on Jesus' command to 'call no one father' (Mt. 23), the assumption regarding the nature of human experience, and the paradigm utilized for relating it to our language about God. This approach is contrasted with contemporary arguments which conclude that reference to God as Father ought to be restricted or even eliminated.

While recognizing the necessity of taking seriously our broken human experience, these two options represent two distinct and incompatible approaches: one theocentric, the other anthropocentric. The anthropocentric approach is held to be ultimately neither compassionate, hopeful or healing. Furthermore, it undermines the validity not only of traditional Christian speech but also of any religious or philosophical language about God.

By contrast, Jesus offers us not just a command, but a theocentric approach which enables us to speak faithfully about God and which promises us a healing of mind, heart and life.