

DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

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God and inclusive language

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Should we use exclusive language when speaking about God? This question arises from the current attempt to eliminate sexist language from common usage.

Three matters have been raised for discussion:

1. the use of the term 'Father' for the first person of the Holy Trinity;
2. the substitution of the term 'Parent' and 'Mother' for 'Father'; and
3. the use of the masculine pronouns 'he', 'him', and 'his' to refer to the first and third persons of the Holy Trinity.

1. SPEAKING OF GOD AS FATHER

The language which we use for God is not merely metaphorical or picture language. Our language for God involves the actual nature of God as revealed to us in Christ. The God who is revealed to humanity in the holy Scriptures is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three persons in the one Godhead.

The first person of the Holy Trinity is not just like a human father in certain respects, but is in fact the Father of our Lord Jesus, the Father from whom all human fatherhood is derived (John 16:6,26). Jesus has directed us to call God 'Father' in the prayer that he taught his disciples and the church (Matt 6:9; Luke 11:2).

Jesus has commanded his followers to baptise all nations in the *name* of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19). In obedience to this command we join with the church of all ages in using the trinitarian baptismal formula in the rite of holy baptism. We ask that the everlasting blessings of the Triune God, into whose name believers are incorporated, would be poured upon the newly-baptised.

The divine name is more than an identifying label; it involves the very nature and being of the revealed God. Like the holy name YHWH in the Old Testament, the Triune name is a proper name. It must therefore be distinguished from all other titles, designations, and common names for God. It is the proper name for God. In giving us this name the Triune God gives himself to us; by it we claim and proclaim God's gracious presence.

Since Jesus the Son has revealed the name of the Father to us, we should use it to address and confess the first person of the Holy Trinity. While we may use many other terms for the first person of the Trinity, this name cannot be replaced by any of them, for it is God's proper name.

2. SPEAKING OF GOD AS MOTHER

When the writers of the holy Scriptures speak of God, they use a wide range of images, metaphors, and symbols to describe what God is like or how God regards and deals with Israel and the human race. Included in these various images and symbols is the use of maternal imagery (for example, Deut 32:18; Isa 42:14; 66:12–13).

We encourage the use of feminine imagery; it helps to guard against understanding the Trinity in purely masculine terms. And it helps to ensure that women and their experience of life are not devalued and discounted by the use of trinitarian language.

Yet while it is appropriate to use a range of feminine imagery in teaching, preaching, and discussion, it is not appropriate to confess and address God by terms which replace or appear to replace the name of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

3. USING MASCULINE PERSONAL PRONOUNS FOR GOD

Many languages classify their nouns in terms of gender. Nouns are either masculine, feminine, or neuter in form. This is the case for Greek, the language of the New Testament. English has largely eliminated this system of classification. It is now only to be found in the use of personal pronouns, where we still distinguish between 'he', 'she', and 'it'. Hence, while 'I', 'you', 'we', and 'they' are inclusive (they can be used to refer to male or female persons), 'he' refers only to a male and 'she' to a female. These pronouns pose the greatest difficulty in any attempt to use inclusive language for the deity.

It is appropriate to use masculine personal pronouns for Jesus the Son, since he has become incarnate as a male human being. However, the use of masculine pronouns for the first and third persons of the Holy Trinity could give the impression that they are male rather than supra-sexual beings. Yet, owing to the limitations of the English language, such terms cannot easily be avoided.

For example:

- a) The use of 'God' instead of 'he' and 'him', and 'God's' instead of 'his' for each reference to the Father can lead to clumsy sentences (for example: 'God loves you; God in fact loves all God's creatures').
- b) The use of feminine personal pronouns ('she', 'her') for the Holy Spirit seems to feminise the third person of the Trinity. Thus we face the same difficulty that we noted above in the use of masculine pronouns for the first and third persons of the Trinity.
- c) The use of alternate masculine and feminine forms can give the impression that we are referring to different beings in the same sentence or paragraph (for example, 'God loves you; he in fact loves all her creatures').

- d) The use of plural forms can threaten the understanding of the unity of the Godhead.

Therefore, although we encourage all legitimate attempts to use inclusive language wherever possible for reference to God, we accept and endorse the continued use of masculine pronouns for the three persons of the Trinity, until such time as English grammar and usage changes to produce easily comprehensible and acceptable alternatives.

4. CONCLUSION

Pastors, teachers, and members of the church are called to continue to use that divine name which is given by revelation in the holy Scriptures, and to proclaim, teach, confess, and address God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.