
Language: Idolatry and Evangelism¹

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Until he was nearly six years old, our youngest son, Mattias, used gendered pronouns interchangeably, a natural linguistic habit his older brothers found charming—but needing correction. Thankfully, they heeded my appeals to let this “confusion” flourish, for I saw that his developing emotions and intellect were uncharted by gender dualism. Sometimes, male individuals were “she;” female individuals were “he.” His stuffed penguin, Peng, is still “she.” Papa was “she” and I was “sir.” For at least those first five years, for Mattias, human identity was not bound to dualisms of sex and gender.

For over forty years many people have worked in various ways through scholarship, education, and collaboration to encourage Lutherans to know and experience both human and divine identity untethered from sex and gender dualisms. In the 1970s, predecessor bodies of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) acted to create changes in language. Some of the institutional recommendations include advice that continues to be relevant. For example, the Church Council of the American Lutheran Church resolved in 1976: “More inclusive symbols and language referring to God are also encouraged so that materials reflect the male/female wholeness of the Christian community and the all-encompassing nature of God.”² In the 1980s, significant Lutheran scholarship on the language of God emerged. For example, Gail Ramshaw offered a clarion call in 1982: “It is time to break the model of God-he. . . . If increasingly in American English ‘he’ denotes male sexuality, it becomes a simple matter of idolatry to refer to God as ‘he.’”³ Men also felt urgencies to challenge androcentric language of God. Five years later, H. Frederick Reisz Jr., wrote: “I urge the pastoral *expansion* of the language we use for God, retaining in some places and times ‘Father and Son,’ and using other words at other times. . . . [I]mages address God and then are broken by God’s Word. I am humble enough to know that all these words and images are not God, and I do see through a veil darkly.”⁴

1. A previous version of this article was first presented to Lutheran Women in Theological and Religious Studies (Baltimore, Maryland), November 22, 2013.

2. Church Council, American Lutheran Church, CC.76.6.119 (Minneapolis: June, 1976).

3. Gail Ramshaw Schmidt, “*De Divinis nominibus: The Gender of God*,” in *Worship* (March 1982): 127.

4. H. Frederick Reisz Jr., “Language and God: Theological and Pastoral Issues,” in *Women and Men in the Body of Christ: A Report by*

Names matter because if you take away someone’s name, you can take away power, symbolically or literally. . . . Names matter because if you change names, you can change power. . . . Names matter because if you insist on particular names, you are insisting on particular forms of power.

Likewise, scholarship on language influenced the early years of the ELCA. In 1989, the Office of the Secretary and the Commission for Communication created and released the document, “Guidelines for Inclusive Use of the English Language for Speakers, Writers and Editors.” It contains advice not only for humankind, but also for Divinity. Language for God is always in transition, the authors point out, yet human speech must express God’s mercy. Although the guide acknowledges Jesus’ address to God as Father, the writers clearly encourage avoidance of male-exclusive language for God and they “admit that sin and distortion have made even [the address of Father] a problem for some.”⁵ Because language is powerful and produces reality to some measure, the guide advocates for a multiplicity of images, not heavily masculine. Importantly, the guide advocates practicing inclusive language and imagery in order to move to fluency.

Many people in a variety of spheres of academic and ecclesial life took to heart the scholarship and urgencies expressed in conversations, handbooks, and committees.⁶ Changes were made. However, the need to engage in dialogue over what is now called expansive language⁷ is no less crucial. I join this decades-long conversation with a twofold thesis: language can be both idolatrous and evangelical.

the Advisory Committee for the Study on Women and Men in the Body of Christ (Lutheran Church in America, 1987), 84. Italics in original.

5. Office of the Secretary and Commission for Communication (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1989), 15.

6. A historical study of the theological and institutional dialogue on language among Lutherans in North America is needed.

7. Expansive language refers to the plethora of divine images in Christian Scripture, whether non-human and gendered or non-gendered human. Inclusive language refers to human language of God that includes feminine and masculine references.

Idolatrous language

We know names and language are powerful. Names matter. *Names matter because if you take away someone's name, you can take away power, symbolically or literally.* White slave traders took away African names and replaced them with English names. Japan colonized Korea during World War II; they forced Koreans to replace their names with Japanese names. *Names matter because if you change names, you can change power.* Sometimes, people on the other side of abuse change their names in order to re-form the power of the relationship for themselves. Sometimes, people who get married change or do not change their names in order to change patriarchal expectations of married couples, especially heterosexual ones. *Names matter because if you insist on particular names, you are insisting on particular forms of power.* I suspect that something similar is going on in terms of language of God. To control names for God, as others have argued, is idolatrous.⁸

Exclusive language is idolatrous because at the heart of the condemnation and resistance is a deeply woven relationship with patriarchy in the Christian tradition. Some arguments against divine Father language flow from the important recognition that people with abusive fathers may be fearful of God the Father. But I think this argument alone is in danger of missing the point about Jesus' use of Father and Son language. God language may be about a loving Abba, yet Jesus' proclamation and the usage of the early Jesus movement are likewise deeply about power and idolatry. To make my point I turn to Scripture and Luther.

When we think about idolatry in Scripture, our minds may initially populate with golden calves. The concern of faith in the Hebrew Bible is that humans recognize their dependence upon God. In Exod 20:4, for example, God attests to being a God of action, one to bring the slaves out of Egypt—and that out of all the other choices, *this* particular God of action is the one to whom to turn.⁹ In the Christian Testament, Paul says a lot about idolaters in 1 Corinthians, connecting them often in a list of particular sins or sinners. From among verses talking about idolatry, I found one interwoven theme striking. The first strand of the theme is in 1 Cor 8:4–6. Paul states that the followers of Jesus know only the one God, the Father, and the one Lord, Jesus Christ, despite that the world offers them “many gods and many lords” (8:5). Followers of Jesus know they are making a choice to follow *this* God and *this* Lord. The second strand of the theme is the double exhortation that any person who is greedy is an idolater (see also Eph 5:5 and Col 3:5). The one who sucks into themselves what they want without regard for others has other gods “before me.” The third strand is that life oriented to the true God shows itself to others.

8. See, for example, Ramshaw Schmidt, 127, and Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

9. See also 1 Sam 15:23 wherein human stubbornness against God is called idolatry; 2 Kgs 17:15, wherein Israel's exile is explained by the fact that Israel itself became false when it went after false idols; and Ezek 14:3, wherein the prophet exclaims that it is a problem when idols become part of our hearts.

Through Father and Son language, Jesus stood up against Caesar as Father of the nations and the Son of God.

In 1 Thess 1:9, the writer praises them for the fact that people noticed “how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God.” Scripture thus shows idolatry as not recognizing the true God and an idolater as being greedy.

New Testament scholarship points the Christian community further in life-giving directions. Remember, names matter. One of the arguments for Father language is that this is the name Jesus used to address “his Father.”¹⁰ Yes, Jesus calls God Father in the Gospels, yet rarely in Mark, compared to John. Paul also refers to God the Father. There is something significant to this. These names, Father and Son, take on the power of Rome. I think this is an incarnational act to claim cosmic, political, and social power. Through Father and Son language, Jesus stood up against Caesar as Father of the nations and the Son of God. As Brigitte Kahl makes clear, Caesar Augustus, as the colonizer of many lands, used multiple means to colonize bodies and minds of subjects, inspiring and/or forcing them to want to belong to *his* fatherhood. In reference to the Galatians, for example, she writes: “Augustus now, in a way, is their new father ... [He holds] supreme patriarchal power over them, which defines, names, and rules them.” Caesar is the father in the fatherland of Rome.¹¹ Furthermore, she points out, Emperor Augustus Caesar, who controlled ancient Palestine, used every means to proclaim “his divine status as ‘son of God’ (*divi filius*, that is, son of the divinized Julius Caesar).”¹² Jesus, then, addresses the God of Israel as Father; Jesus (not Caesar) is proclaimed the Son of God, *this* Father.

How incomparably tragic that we have not seen or heard well the disruption these titles caused—and continue to cause. Jesus and the movement surrounding him claim *this* Father, not Caesar. *This* Son, not Caesar. The God of Jesus challenges the law and the way of the Roman Empire. Kahl explains it this way: “Only the ‘will of God the Father,’ the *true* God who is the primeval creator and who rules ‘unto the ages of the ages’ (1:4–5), can inaugurate [the new creation]—not the father god Zeus, or Jupiter, or Caesar.”¹³ What news! The gospel unseats Caesar; it disrupts idolatry.

What does this mean for us? Luther's understanding of idolatry in the *Small Catechism* and *Large Catechism* helps us out here. The *Small Catechism* states: “You are to have no other gods. What is

10. I hear in this argument hints of an ethical Christology—to do as Jesus did. While space does not allow exploration of language from a doctrine of revelation, I note the importance of this research.

11. Brigitte Kahl, *Galatians Re-Imagined* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 182–183.

12. *Ibid.*, 181.

13. *Ibid.*, 260.

this? We are to fear, love, and trust God above all things.”¹⁴ Above all, no one and nothing else competes. In the *Large Catechism*, Luther lingers longer in his pastoral explanation and makes clear that God—any god—has to do with our heart, trust, and desire. “[T]he correct interpretation of this commandment is that to have a god is to have something in which the heart trusts completely.”¹⁵ In fact, he continues, humans have always made gods out of what they desire most. “Idolatry does not consist merely of erecting an image and praying to it, but it is primarily a matter of the heart, which fixes its gaze upon other things and seeks help and consolation from creatures, saints, or devils.”¹⁶ And just who is this God, in Luther’s eyes, to whom we rightly turn? “To have a God ... does not mean to grasp him with your fingers, or to put him into a purse, or to shut him up in a box. Rather, you lay hold of God when your heart grasps him and clings to him.”¹⁷ God is not ours to limit but ours to give our hearts to.¹⁸

Limits are what show themselves, however, in reactions to expansive language of God. I mention two limits here, condemnation and resistance. Condemnation is relatively easy to point out. Although a few Lutheran theologians are among the most vocal, Robert Jenson’s argument against expansive language seems to hover in the depths of every argument against it, either explicitly or implicitly. He is worth quoting at length:

“Father” was Jesus’ peculiar address to the particular transcendence over against whom he lived. Just by this address he qualified himself as “the Son.” ... “Spirit” was the term provided by the whole biblical theology for what comes of such a meeting between this God and a special human of his. ...

Emerging consciousness of the historic oppression of women rightly watches for expressions thereof also, or perhaps principally, in inherited interpretations of God. When such are found, Christianity has every reason to eliminate them. ... Trinitarian Father-language cannot, however, be one such.¹⁹

Jenson’s argument thus far is tied to what Jesus did. However, Jenson ties his argument to a questionable gendered ontology. He writes:

The choice between “mother” and “father,” as terms of

14. Martin Luther, *Small Catechism, The Book of Concord*, Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 351.

15. *Large Catechism*, 387.

16. *Ibid.*, 388.

17. *Ibid.* I retained Luther’s androcentric language in part to highlight the difficulty of relying on gendered pronouns to refer to the God who cannot be grasped.

18. Another form of idolatry upon which Luther spent much time and energy is justification. He argued that the danger of works is that they can become an idol.

19. Robert W. Jenson, “The Triune God,” in *Christian Dogmatics*, Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 1:93–94.

We might see our congregations as places where the underlying spiritual and theological dynamics of [the] conversation are being actively explored and forged.

filial address to God, was and must be made according to which term is more easily separable from the reproductive role.

Sexuality, as the union of sensuality and differentiated reproductive roles and apparatus, is the glory of our specific humanity. ... [W]ithin the mutuality of male and female, the female is ontologically superior. She is the more ineradicably human, for while sensuality and reproduction can socially be ripped apart in the male, ... not even abortion can do this to the female. ... [I]t is just the ontological inferiority of the male that offers “Father” rather than “Mother” as the proper term of address to Israel’s sexually transcendent God, when a filial term is needed.²⁰

Making this argument from the idea that females are ontologically superior seems to be an oddly anti-Lutheran move on Jenson’s part. Given the best of Lutheran theology, particularly on creation and sin, his argument seems to tumble into exposure as a simple clinging to male parts, literally and linguistically.²¹

Although expressions of resistance, particularly at the congregational level, might not be as dramatic as that of Jenson, I do think that the resistance comes from a familiar habit to prioritize what is masculine. One example of how this plays out centers on *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Shortly before it was published, people expressed their anxieties over God-language. People said things such as, “Now I hear you’re going to take God the Father away from us.” Indeed, they were wanting where their hearts rest. Other people said things like, “There couldn’t be just *one* Eucharistic setting with female pronouns and images?” Indeed, they were wanting where their hearts rest.²²

Speaking of hearts leads to the second aspect of my thesis: Expansive language is evangelical.

20. *Ibid.*, 94.

21. For a helpful critique, see Lois Malcolm, “On Not Three Male Gods: Retrieving Wisdom in Trinitarian Discourse,” in *Dialog* 49 (Fall 2010):238–247, esp. 243–245.

22. Struggles show up in classrooms, congregations, and institutional offices alike.

Evangelical language

Language matters. Seemingly simple, it is forever complex. Psycholinguist Jean Berko Gleason has studied linguistic development for decades. What she finds, in short, is that humans are innately creative with language—and linguistic development is intensely interactive. Linguistic development between children and adults, she concludes, shapes our spirits and our communities.²³ Such research is a sure sign of the flexibility and freedom of language and its inherent value for human life, how it speaks to and fosters the development of human spirit.

At the same time, learned internalized meanings and later knowledge are hard to bring together.²⁴ In fact, Berko Gleason's early research indicates that linguistic form is primary to meaning when adults teach children ritualized language. In other words, the meaning of ritualized language is only explored after learning the "proper" form of it.²⁵ Because language is encoded, we are shaped by its meanings.²⁶ For example, in the 1960s, most married women in the United States were referred to as "Mrs. (man's first-and-last name)." The code in such language was that women were identified by a man and belonged to him. Linguistic change reflects changes in our thinking. As women refused this kind of naming, language changed, so much so that by the turn of this century few women were identified by their male spouse's first name. In other words, meaning and understanding go hand-in-hand. Practices begin to reflect intertwined changes wrought by language and ideas.

Along with others, I hope religious linguistic renewal reflects theological and social changes. If meaning and understanding are interconnected, and if our spirits and communities are shaped by these meanings and understandings, then what lies before us is the necessity to connect understanding to usage. In short, understandings of God relate to usage: to names, metaphors, and images.²⁷ How we speak of God is evangelical because it connects meaning to understanding through usage. Language proclaims who God is and what God has done for us.

Scholarship demonstrates well the scriptural and theological faithfulness of expansive language. We find ourselves still in need of Ramshaw's reminders that even our interpretation of the multiplicity of biblical images can fall into gender essentialism and that we would do well to pay attention to verbs—God's verbs, Jesus' verbs, and the Spirit's verbs. She writes:

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A shepherd is not necessarily male. . . . A potter is not necessarily a man. . . . The verb for the Spirit's hovering over the waters of creation (Gen 1:2) is the same verb used of a nesting mother bird. We are called to more creative exposition of scriptural images. The metaphors that have enslaved women in the past can be turned to signify God's freedom.²⁸

Scripture provides freedom to witness to God's good news in many ways. We are also dependent upon work like that of Lois Malcolm, who, like Elizabeth Johnson, plumbs the theological tradition to argue in favor of non-androcentric God language. She writes: "The baffling of gender literalism in ancient trinitarian texts is significant not only because it presents Christ as a feminine figure, but more importantly because it points to what lies at the heart of the *mystery of the incarnation*: that in God Christ became human so that we could become divine."²⁹ There should be no question that diverse, non-androcentric language is scripturally and theologically faithful.

Language is a means of witnessing to the Gospel; it is thus evangelical. Paul gives us an early glimpse of the heart of evangelism—communicating so that others hear the good news of Jesus Christ. To the Corinthians he writes: "For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews" (1 Cor 9:19–20a). He continues: "To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the Gospel, so that I may share in its blessings" (1 Cor 9:22–23). As I struggled to hear what my heart needed to hear one Sunday, this was one of the lessons. I immediately heard Paul say: "I became a feminist." "I became a womanist." "I became queer." "I became a *mujer*."

23. Krista Tippitt, "Unfolding Language, Unfolding Life," <http://onbing.org/programs/2011/unfolding-language/emailnewsletter.shtml>, 1–2.

24. Kate Swift and Casey Miller, *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing: For Writers, Editors and Speakers*, 2nd ed. (Lincoln: iUniverse.com, Inc., 2000), 8.

25. Jean Berko Gleason, "The Acquisition of Routines in Child Language," in *Language in Society*, Vol. 5 (Aug. 1976):129–136.

26. See *Handbook*, 4.

27. See also Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, "God, Sexism, and Transformation" in *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, Rebecca S. Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor, eds. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 25–48.

28. Gail Ramshaw, *Christ in Sacred Speech: The Meaning of Liturgical Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 55.

29. Malcolm, 244.

Luther, of course, was evangelical. The Gospel was at the center of his life as teacher, pastor, and scholar. He writes:

Faith is a living, bold trust in God's grace, so certain of God's favor that it would risk death a thousand times trusting in it. Such confidence and knowledge of God's grace makes you happy, joyful and bold in your relationship to God and all creatures. The Holy Spirit makes this happen through faith. Because of it, you freely, willingly and joyfully do good to everyone, serve everyone, suffer all kinds of things, love and praise the God who has shown you such grace.³⁰

I think that Luther was an emotive evangelist; he sought to influence people's hearts for them to hear God's grace.³¹ Three simple practices tell us he wanted to influence people's spirits. First, his biblical and liturgical translations from ancient languages into common German spoke directly to ordinary people. Second, he set hymns to familiar tunes, not only already familiar hymns, but also dance melodies and folk tunes, making them accessible. Third, Luther's *Small Catechism* is like a little handbook for the faith. Beyond hymns, the Bible, and liturgy, the *Small Catechism* was the Twitter of the sixteenth century—little bits of Christian theology made available and accessible. Luther sought to embody emotive evangelism, to reach people with the Gospel.

Many others have followed in Luther's wake. The evangelical proclamation of the good news of God's grace became particularly diverse in the last century as we came to recognize systems of power and oppression. The church catholic is learning to recognize the necessities of context, community, and confession of Christian abuses. Through contextualized image, practice, and language, multiple Christians evangelize. To name but a few examples, we

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see biblical figures as Asian through images by Sadao Watanabe. Through James Cone, we hear that God is Black. Ada María Isasi-Díaz evangelized through the centrality of community and declares Jesus in the sufferings of women; she joined images of God and practices of indigenous women to show they are sites of knowing God and being known by God. These diverse images and practices, shaped by critiques of racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, and classism are evangelical.

Like visual images and faith practices, language is evangelical. This feminist Lutheran wants to hear the good news and asks others to help me hear it. Will you become a feminist—for the sake of the Gospel? For the sake of the Gospel, I will become for you a womanist, a *mujerista*, a queer. I turn to you, near and far, anticipating you will change me. I will hear and proclaim the Gospel differently than if I had not accepted the call to be vulnerable—to be known through Christ—created, broken, redeemed. Luther emphasized that God's promises are for us, *pro nobis*. They are for you and for me. For us. To be Lutheran is to be evangelical so that the Gospel is heard! Because expansive language is non-idolatrous and because it is evangelical, I conclude that calling for and embracing multiple, shifting, and confident language is at the heart of what it means to be Lutheran.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think about the ways Scripture and Luther talked about idolatry? In what ways do these sources speak to your own experiences of faith and life?
2. In what ways have you experienced language of God to proclaim the Gospel?
3. What surprised you in this article? What more would you like to find out or talk about?

30. "An Introduction to St. Paul's Letter to the Romans," Dr. Martin Luther's *Vermischte Deutsche Schriften*, Johann K. Immisher, ed., Robert E. Smith, trans. (Erlangen: Heyder and Zimmer, 1854), 63:124–125, <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/luther-faith.txt> (Accessed February 11, 2016).

31. See my forthcoming article, "A Word of the Word for Our Hearts: Luther on Language and the Word—Words for Expansive God-Language."