



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Recovering Discarded Images
(*Women and the Church*, pp. 11-19)

What do you think?

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Christian Reflection

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Recovering Discarded Images

Scripture's feminine metaphors for God yield a more dynamic understanding of divine nature and remind us that women as well as men are capable of bearing God's image in the world. Embracing these images in worship helps us to engage with God's gracious, multifaceted invitation to us.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Job 38:1-11

Responsive Reading

Come all who have gathered,
to taste and see that God is good,
to trust and hope in the Holy One:
the Holy Creator,
the Holy Redeemer,
the Holy Midwife in our midst.

Because of you, O God, we are not consumed,
your compassions never fail.
They are new every morning.
Great is your faithfulness.

Reflection

Metaphors for God in Scripture serve two key functions: teaching us about God and drawing us nearer to God experientially. They not only illuminate "the unknown by use of the known and the infinite through the finite," Kristina LaCelle-Peterson writes, but also "draw on personal experience... [to] produce an emotional response, so we experience one thing in terms of another."

"God's nature is too immense to be captured by one image and our disparate life situations too varied to be tapped by one metaphor," she reminds us. Thus, the biblical images comparing God to inanimate objects, forces of nature, animals, people in various roles, and both human genders should not be taken literally or alone. Indeed, focusing on just one might lead us to a form of idolatry, to "confuse the metaphor with reality and make absolute something that was meant to be illustrative." Rather, following the lead of Scripture, we should allow these images to balance and enrich one another.

For instance, the book of Job employs both male and female images to characterize God's creative activity. Like a builder (typically a man's employment in the ancient world), God lays the earth's foundation and cornerstone (38:4-6); but like a midwife, God cares for the emerging waters (38:8-11). In his notes on the latter passage, John Wesley (1703-1791) explained that as the sea breaks forth "from the womb...of the earth" by divine command "like a newborn infant," God wraps it in "clouds as swaddling-bands" and lovingly prepares "those hollow places in the earth, which might serve for a cradle to receive and hold this great and goodly infant when it came out of the womb."¹

Given the many female images for God in Scripture, LaCelle-Peterson observes, "the question is not whether using female images for God will draw us away from orthodox Christianity, but whether using exclusively male metaphors will so distort our view of God as to render our concept of God unbiblical."



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She concludes with this advice for incorporating Scripture's feminine language for God in our prayer and worship:

- ▶ *Address God in gender-neutral terms* (Gracious God or Loving Savior) or *feminine images* (Holy Midwife or Divine Wisdom) sometimes in order to avoid conceiving of God as male. "Sermons and other Christian instruction should include the metaphorical pictures from Scripture of God as female so that worshipers know that this is a biblical approach to God (and not the invention of the feminist movement)," she adds.
- ▶ *Use the variety of biblical terms to affirm the Trinitarian nature of God.* In addition to employing the creedal (and oft-found biblical) wording for the Trinity as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, we can carefully follow New Testament writers who address God in other ways, even in Trinitarian formulations (e.g., 2 Corinthians 13:13; cf. Romans 7:25 and 16:20, 27; 1 Corinthians 15:57; Philippians 1:3-6; and Jude 24-25).
- ▶ *Respond to concerns about using feminine metaphors for God.* Some may object that since Jesus taught us to pray "Our Father," we should address God in no other way. However, Jesus refers to God in other ways, New Testament writers use a variety of names for God, and in prayers outside the Gospels, God is never addressed as "Father." Another objection is that since Jesus was a male human being, God must be gendered. LaCelle-Peterson replies, "Obviously to enter into the human race God had to adopt biological sex, not to mention a particular skin color, eye color, height, and so on. None of these things are characteristics of the whole Trinity, but of the divine-human Savior who came among us."

Study Questions

1. Discuss how masculine and feminine images of God are balanced in scripture passages such as: Isaiah 42:14-15a; Luke 15:1-10; and Luke 13:18-21//Matthew 13:31-33.
2. Consider how feminine images stand alone to describe God in scripture passages such as: Deuteronomy 32:18; Psalm 131:2; Isaiah 66:12a, 13a; Hosea 11:3-4; and Luke 13:34.
3. The New Testament teaches that believers experience a "new birth" from God (John 3:3-10; James 1:18; and 1 Peter 1:3) and are nursed in their infancy by God (1 Peter 2:2-3). What do these female images teach us about our relationship to God?
4. According to LaCelle-Peterson, what are the theological dangers of using only masculine metaphors for God?
5. "The most significant name for God in the Old Testament, *Yahweh*, I AM, emphasizes God's being, not a male identity," LaCelle-Peterson writes. "God is not pictured as a sexualized male deity akin to Ba'al or any of the other gods of the Ancient Near East who had female consorts with whom to procreate." What is the importance of these facts?
6. What concerns you most about incorporating female imagery for God in prayer and worship?

Departing Hymn: "The Sacred Now"

† John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament* (1765), Job 38:8-10.

Recovering Discarded Images

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Job 38:1-11	Exodus 3:1-15
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Explore female images for God in Scripture	Discuss theological significance of female images of God in prayer and worship
Questions 1, 4, and 6	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions 4, 5, and 6
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider why the Bible includes a variety of metaphors or images, which cannot be taken literally or alone, to describe God.
2. To explore some of the female images for God in Scripture.
3. To discuss how we can incorporate these female images for God in our prayer and worship.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide.

Distribute copies of *Women and the Church (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Comment

“God has created each one of us, every human being, for greater things – to love and to be loved,” Mother Theresa (1910-1997) has written. “But why did God make some of us men and others women? Because a woman’s love is one image of the love of God, and a man’s love is another image of God’s love. Both are created to love, but each in a different way. Woman and man complete each other, and together show forth God’s love more fully than either can do it alone.” (Mother Teresa, *A Message For The World Conference On Women, Beijing, China, 1995*)

How then could Scripture describe the full extent and texture of God’s love, except through a variety of images, both masculine and feminine?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to help members faithfully interpret and employ the rich variety of biblical metaphors for the divine.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Job 38:1-11 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

This discussion surveys the feminine metaphors for God in the Bible. Kristina LaCelle-Peterson refers to them as “discarded images” because we often overlook them when we study Scripture, failing to let them enrich our understanding of God and draw us into deeper relationship with God. LaCelle-Peterson’s suggestion that we gradually restore the use of these images in our prayer and worship may raise several concerns – to follow

Jesus' instructions on prayer, to maintain an orthodox view of the Trinitarian nature of God, and to uncritically endorse elements of contemporary culture. Prayerfully consider her responses to each of these concerns, and encourage members to discuss any related worries that they may have.

You might extend this discussion to two sessions. In one, explore some of the female images for God in the Bible. In the other session, discuss how these images can be integrated into personal and congregational prayer and worship.

Study Questions

1. Invite three small groups to review how masculine and feminine images of God are balanced to make the same point in each of the following passages. Isaiah 42:10-17 is a psalm inviting all people to praise God for leading the people out of exile and away from idolatry; God's determination is like the shouting warrior and the mother crying out in childbirth. The parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin in Luke 15:1-10 depict God's determination to seek out and care for wayward individuals. Luke 13:18-21 (cf. the parallel passage in Matthew 13:31-33) depicts God's patience in bringing forth the kingdom, like a farmer (typically a man's employment in the ancient world) who plants a tiny seed and tends a fragile plant, or a woman carefully works a bit of yeast into a lump of dough in order to make bread.
2. Assign several groups to study the distinctive roles of female imagery for God in these passages. In Deuteronomy 32:18, female imagery expresses a major theme in "the song of Moses," that Yahweh is "the Rock" (Deuteronomy 32:18; cf. 32:4, 15, 30-31) who is radically different from other so-called deities. Hosea 11:3-4 develops a similar theme. Elsewhere female images for God encourage our humble obedience to God as to a loving mother (Psalm 131:2), describe God's comforting presence (Isaiah 66:13a), and characterize Jesus Christ's deep love for rebellious Jerusalem (Luke 13:34).
3. "Birth and nursing imagery, rather than being embarrassing or beneath God in some way, were worthy comparisons to emphasize the intimacy of God's connection to and care for us," LaCelle-Peterson observes. She finds it "ironic that in our era the people most comfortable calling themselves 'born again' Christians are most opposed to picturing God as the mother who birthed them, the one who gave this born again experience."
4. Recall that metaphors help us both *understand* God and *encounter* God. Restricting ourselves to masculine images for God may distort our comprehension of God and mislead us to think that women are not as able as men to bear God's image in the world. Also, it will become more difficult for us to draw near to God experientially if we reduce God to our human father's limitations or to the culture's limited ideal of male parents.
5. Ancient Israel was continually tempted to confuse Yahweh with the polytheistic deities worshiped by their neighbors. The latter were limited sexualized beings that favored a particular nation, and produced other creatures and elements of the world out of themselves through an act of procreation. Instead the biblical writers inspired the related ideas that God is distinguished from and transcends the entire universe as its creator, and that God rules over and judges all nations. Encourage members to discuss how we are tempted today to reduce God to a cultural projection, a national figurehead, to someone we can control, etc.
6. Discuss LaCelle-Peterson's responses to concerns that we should follow Jesus' instruction to address God as "Our Father" in prayer, endorse the credal formulation of the Trinity as "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost," and not endorse uncritically contemporary feminist analyses of religion. Members may raise additional concerns about employing the biblical female images for God, such as that these images may distract some people from worship, be misinterpreted in the context of New Age thought, or encourage the uncritical use of non-biblical images. How might you address these concerns in your congregation?

Departing Hymn

"The Sacred Now" can be found on pp. 65-67 of *Women and the Church*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.