

## Talking About God

Theology may be God-talk, but every theologian has to acknowledge that talking about God is hard. On the most basic level, our human languages are inadequate to speak of God. For one thing, the Bible has revealed God to us in two aspects: God in Unity and God in Trinity. One of the first problems we run into as English speakers when we talk about God under either of these aspects is the problem of pronouns.

We used to always talk about God as "He" - look at any old Anglican prayer book and you will see it. Now we make the greatest efforts to speak about God God's self without using the language of sex, without trying to assign God a gender, especially when we are speaking about God in Unity. But when we talk about God in Trinity, things become immediately more complicated.

It appears to be completely appropriate to talk about the Father and the Son, as "He", so long as we keep in mind that calling the first and second Persons of the Trinity by such human terms as "father" or "son" are only analogies, a concession to our need for names with which to address and label them. But we do have good authority for using these names in the Gospel of John, where Jesus makes clear that the familial relationship he has as Son with the Father who sent him is central to the identity of both. It is harder to talk about the Holy Spirit: although the Spirit is discussed in terms of the Spirit's relationship to the Father and Son in the Gospel of John, that relationship is not familial. Furthermore our understanding of the Spirit and the Spirit's

work is always growing and deepening as that work itself changes to meet new challenges for the Church.

One thing that has been creating difficulties in recent decades is the apparently simple question of what pronouns to use. Is the Spirit another "He"? Or is the Spirit a "She"? The Spirit certainly isn't "It" - or is it? It's extremely important, and unlike another human being, we can't ask the Spirit what pronoun the Spirit would prefer!

These confusions arise, for English speakers, with the difficulty of understanding how languages like Hebrew and Greek, in which our primary text, the Bible, are written, deal with gendered nouns and pronouns. In Hebrew there are two genders for nouns and pronouns, referred to as masculine and feminine. In Greek there are three genders, referred to as masculine, feminine, and neuter (or neutral). That seems straightforward enough. The difficulties arise when we English speakers, who lack the concept of grammatical gender, try to line up grammatical gender with sex. It doesn't work exactly: although many words have a grammatical gender that seems to match up with the sex of the person or animal referred to, there's not an exact correlation. After all a lot of the words in Hebrew and Greek refer to inanimate objects or ideas.

So when we learn that in Hebrew the grammatical gender of *ruach*, the word for "spirit", is feminine, it does not mean that in Hebrew the word referred to someone or something female. And when we discover that the grammatical gender of the word used to translate *ruach* into Greek and that was used by the New Testament writers to refer to the Holy Spirit, *pneuma*, is neuter/neutral, we haven't discovered that Greek-speakers think of "spirit" as something impersonal. Because there's not an exact mapping of gender with sex (especially when we are dealing with words for objects or ideas), we can't necessarily use a noun's gender to assign it a pronoun in English. In languages with grammatical genders, pronouns follow the gender of the

nouns they refer to. So in Hebrew, the pronoun used to refer to the Spirit would be feminine, while in Greek the pronoun would be neuter/neutral. In English we don't have these options because we don't have grammatical gender and so we don't know, even analogously, what the gender of the Spirit is.

There's a wonderful opportunity here that many in the church are missing! In a world in which we are striving to catch up with the need for gender-neutral language, or at least gender-sensitive language, in our liturgy, we should embrace the idea of a gender-neutral Spirit. This is going to be hard for older theologians (among whom I definitely include myself). When we hear that, unlike with the Father and the Son, we don't know what pronouns to use when we want to refer to the Holy Spirit, we think the Spirit is being reduced to something less personal, no longer Someone with whom we can enter into relationship. But we need to learn from the secular ferment around us!

We should seize the opportunity to proclaim that at the heart of God, in the very Trinity, this mystery of identity is enacted. We are learning now that what we thought were certainties about human identity are not always so: why should we be surprised if it proves that in God too there is a gender-neutral Person exactly where we have been fighting about whether that Person should be referred to as "He" or "She". Let's bury that linguistic hatchet. Let us delight to call the Spirit "They", or even to use one of the "new" pronouns that Professor Peterson finds so distressing. I am quite sure that They won't mind - and who knows but that this may be exactly one of those truths into which the Father and Son have sent the Spirit to lead us!