

A Statement on Language

Language is close to the heart of Christian faith. As befits a faith community called into being by a God we know as the Word made flesh, we pray, proclaim, teach, comfort, admonish, serve and administer justice with words woven in and through all our actions. Language used in worship has great power. Therefore the language used in collections of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs matters a great deal. Worshipful words joined to worshipful music deeply shape the faith and practices of the church.

The church has been enriched by several decades of conversations about language used for God and for the people of God. Christians in denominations like the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have become aware that our language can exclude and stereotype, but also that carefully chosen language can embrace and include people who have been separated from the centers of power. A commitment to inclusive language for the people of God reflects the consensus of the church.¹ When it comes to use of language for God, however, the conversation is still ongoing. While many are deeply nurtured and comforted by traditional imagery for God, many others are concerned about associations of patriarchy and other forms of domination and are looking for other and more diverse language.

In negotiating these different convictions, the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song is guided by the theological framework of this new collection of songs: salvation history. Scripture uses an abundantly rich array of prose and poetry to tell us about God's powerful acts of creation, redemption, and final transformation. Much biblical imagery is indeed masculine, but there is also a wide variety of other metaphors that are either feminine or gender-neutral. Most important, behind *all* biblical narrative lies the deep and prevailing sense that God is the one whose ways and thoughts are as beyond human speech as the heaven is higher than the earth (Isa. 55:8). Our lips need to be cleansed by a burning coal before we speak or sing any word about the holy God (Isa. 6:5).

The framework of salvation history requires a collection of songs that reflects the full extent of the biblical narrative and also the full array of biblical language used for God – even if that leads us to using words and imagery that go beyond our natural comfort.

Given these commitments, the Committee seeks a songbook that is characterized, as a church document formulates it, by “inclusive language with reference to the people of God, and expansive language with reference to God.”² Thus the committee uses the following guidelines:

Language used for the people of God

- Language that stereotypes persons according to categories such as gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic class, sexual orientation, age, or disabilities will be avoided.
- The “generic masculine” is no longer generally understood to include persons of both genders and will therefore be avoided. Texts that employ the generic masculine will be evaluated individually to determine what alterations, if any, are poetically appropriate.

- Salvation history invites us to sing joyfully of the creative and healing presence of our God. We will be sensitive, however, to potentially denigrating implications of poetic metaphors in our songs, especially with respect to persons of color or with disabilities.

Language used for God

- The collection will draw from the full reservoir of biblical imagery for God and God's gracious acts. The final product will include both metaphors that are comfortable in their familiarity and those that are enriching in their newness.
- The collection will emphasize that the God who meets us so graciously and intimately in salvation history is at the same time one who is wholly other and beyond gender.³ Therefore, texts will reflect a strong preference for avoiding the use of male pronouns for God. In evaluating each hymn or song, issues of tradition, theological integrity, poetic quality, and copyright will all be considered. The goal is a collection in which traditional hymns and songs are balanced with others that are more gender-neutral or expansive in their reference to God.
- Two references to God should be preserved in the collection:

1. In the biblical narrative both the God of Israel and Christ are called "Lord." The practice of calling God "Lord" goes back to Greek-speaking Jews who sought to avoid pronouncing God's holy name, YHWH, by using a replacement term: Lord (*kurios*). The practice has since been followed by virtually all Christian Bible translations. Rather than being an expression of domination or masculinity, "Lord" stands in for the name by which God chose to disclose Godself in Hebrew Scripture (Exod. 3:15).

That "Jesus Christ is Lord (*kurios*)" is one of the oldest confessions concerning Jesus. It has both a Roman and a Jewish background. On the one hand, "Lord" (*kurios*) was the title of the Roman emperor. When the writers of the New Testament confess Jesus to be Lord, they thereby proclaim that not Caesar, but Christ rules this world. On the other hand, in applying the reference to the name of Israel's God to Jesus, the New Testament makes a startling identity statement: that in Jesus this very God has become present among us.

Were we no longer to use "Lord" for Israel's God, we would no longer understand what we claim about Jesus' identity when we confess him Lord. Were we no longer to use "Lord" for Jesus, we would lose the strongest defense we have against empire: that Christ is Lord, and not Caesar.

2. The church confesses a Trinitarian God: one God, in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is the formula by which we are baptized; this is the name that unites us with each other and with all Christian communities beyond our denomination (Matt. 28:19). This three-fold name will not be eliminated. At the same time, many other images and metaphors for the Trinity will be welcomed, as long as they express the principles of Trinitarian theology:

- a. God exists in three persons, but there is nevertheless only one God who knows and loves and acts;
 - b. In salvation history, no person of the Trinity acts alone; every act is an act of all three persons in the one God;
 - c. Each person of the Trinity is not a part of God, but fully God.
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¹ Cf. the *Book of Order* W-1.2006-a, the PC(USA) “Report and Recommendations in Response to Referral on Inclusive Language,” and the “Report to the Church on Issues of Language and Gender.”

² *Well Chosen Words!* Published by the Women’s Ministries, National Ministries Division, and the Advocacy Committee for Women’s Concerns, a ministry of the General Assembly Council of the PC(USA). Cf. also the *Book of Order* W-1.2006-b.

³ Cf. the PC(USA) *The Study Catechism*, questions 11-13.