

OpenTheo

#93 Gendered language and God as 'father'

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Why does the Bible use gendered language? Can I trust God as father when I was abused by mine? Should we pray to Jesus the son or God the father? Tom tackles these and more Qs.

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Transcript

Hi there! Before we begin today's podcast, I want to share an incredibly special resource with you today. If you're like me, life can get pretty hectic pretty quickly, but one thing that helps me slow down is connecting with God in new ways. And I'd like to share a resource that has really helped me do that.

It's called "Five Ways to Connect with God" and you can download it for free right now at premierinsight.org/resources. I think you'll find refreshment for your soul. So go right now to premierinsight.org/resources and download your copy. That's premierinsight.org/resources.

[Music] The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast.

[Music] Hello and welcome back to the show. It's Justin Briley bringing you the program where I get to sit down with renowned New Testament scholar NT Wright each week and ask him the questions that you've asked. Brought to you in partnership with NT Wright online and SBCK and of course premier for whom I'm the theology and apologetics editor.

And today on the show we're talking patriarchy and the Bible. Is the gendered language often used for God as father, a problem? And what about those who struggle to relate to

God as a father figure because of maybe past abuse of a human father? And how should we pray to God as well? Is it as a father or as Jesus or what? So lots of questions coming up on today's podcast. Thanks so much to Sophie who gets in touch and has actually left a rating and a review of the podcast.

Says this has been so helpful for me. Of course nothing should ever replace Bible reading. But this gives me so much motivation to read my Bible by giving historical background and more knowledge to show Jesus who has changed my life to others.

Thank you so much for this podcast and sharing all your knowledge. Great to know that you're listening along Sophie. God bless you.

If you're enjoying the podcast as well do rate and review us in iTunes or wherever you get your podcast from. Helps others to find out about the show. And if you want more from us including regular updates, bonus content and all the good stuff from the show, askentiright.com is the place to sign up.

Right now let's get into your questions today. Well we often talk in some form or another about issues around gender and identity as they are so frequently issues in today's culture aren't they Tom? But specifically we've got questions today on the Bible's use of gender, especially when it comes to God. And well why don't we we limp leap stride straight in.

This is from Tim in Great Barrington, Massachusetts in the US. And says did Tom why should we accept the Bible's gendered pronouns and imagery as they have been historically translated? I have a disagreement with a friend who wants to use more feminine inclusive language when referring to the God of Scripture like she and mother and queen. I've argued that God knows what he's doing when he uses patriarchal imagery like king and father and we can trust him with that sort of language even despite a historical and societal oppressive masculinity.

And you can say here Tim I've even gone so far as to use the woke rhetoric that God's preferred pronouns are he him and we ought to respect that. But what might be the pitfalls or benefits of any to willingly swapping gendered attributes into Scripture? Okay well this is a this is a hot potato if ever there was one Tom so how do you want to handle it? It is a hot potato though it's been around quite a while I mean I first ran into this 30 or more years ago and around then professors in seminaries in North America at least were not infrequently requiring that students should not use he him for God and indeed they would refuse to mark or mark down essays that contain such things. So this is hardly a new thing.

Obviously this comes out of a deep seated cultural revulsion against the arrogance and often violence of a male dominated world. Now the world has not always been male dominated there have been societies which have been matriarchal societies there have

been whole cities which have had female dominated religion like ancient Ephesus with its temple of Diana Artemis with its female only priesthood etc so we shouldn't buy into the myth that says that everybody until the modern feminist movement has been entirely under the sway of the patriarchy. However it is undoubtedly the case that the natural human tendency to exploit who we are has led to men being normally slightly more more physically strong whatever than women and to organize the world around their needs and desires rather than those of the women that that's how it has been perceived for many many people and still is and the whole Me Too movement etc is a way of saying hang on you men have been getting away with sometimes literally murder but certainly a lot of other things for far too long and we're just going to say no to it thank you very much.

Now when you're faced with that I can understand that for some people just the notion of a he a father a big strong authority figure sends shivers down the spine and makes people think no I've lived my life in terror for such a being and I don't want to go with it anymore. Rather as and I know this is a hugely contentious thing and when I was first in Israel I lived in Israel for three months in 1989. One of my Palestinian Anglican clergy friends explained to me that there were some Psalms that Palestinians couldn't sing because they were about Israel beating up her enemies and he said you know my people are being beaten up by Israeli soldiers all the time and we simply can't sing these Psalms and that may be a shame but that's who we are.

I understand that that for some people some of the time a certain retinas reticence may be appropriate. That said there are passages in scripture where God is portrayed with female imagery and this is well known and people have written about it this way in that but in Isaiah when God says that I'm like somebody like a woman going into labor I'm going to gasp and pant because my new creation needs to be born and I'm right there giving birth to it etc. And that is picked up interestingly in a passage I refer to in a different podcast in the language Paul uses about the Holy Spirit in Romans eight where he talks about creation groaning in labor pains and then the church within creation groaning in labor pains and then the spirit within the church also groaning in labor pains.

And so I remember twenty or thirty years ago doing a Bible exposition in a big public place where I said that if we were to translate this to bring that out we would say that the spirit herself groans within us and indeed because the Hebrew word *Ruhr* which is what we translate as spirit is a feminine noun and it's cognates in Syriac and Aramaic are feminine. Some of the early Syriac fathers thought of the Holy Spirit as if you like the feminine side or member or something of the Godhead. That's something we should be very very careful about but I think we want to be aware that there is more mystery there than we might sometimes have imagined and that if we do use continually the language of he him which which I certainly do because that's it causes all sorts of problems if you don't go that route linguistic as well as other problems then this shouldn't blind us to the fact that as classical theists have always said God is beyond gender.

Jesus is a male human being there's no question about that. God the father is not masculine or male in that same sense the spirit is not masculine or male in that same sense. At this point we are in a very mysterious world.

The question then is partly a cultural thing are we in fact making it harder for people to approach in love and gratitude the God of scripture by using certain language or is it then a matter of educating them to say no. Actually this will redeem the idea of fatherhood this might redeem the idea of maleness itself and maybe part of the humility of the gospel is to learn that is very very difficult for me as an elderly white male to say all this kind of thing but that's where I think the issue sits right now and I understand and respect people who say I just can't use this language at the moment. But it does produce very odd reformulations if you try to get rid of all genderedness.

I mean on a slightly separate issue I frequently use the NRSV which is essentially gender inclusive in large parts at least where it's referring to things like where you might get in some translations dear brethren or the brothers or whatever it will say brothers and sisters. I mean how do you feel about those kinds of changes to scripture to bring out a more inclusive way to do that myself. I think I've translated my own translation I've translated the brethren word as my dear family and it seems to me that is what Paul means.

At the same time I noticed that in say the Pentecost passage in Acts 2 Peter quotes on the day of Pentecost that the passage which says your sons and your daughters will profit from the day of Pentecost. Your daughters will profit by and so on so sons doesn't necessarily include daughters that sometimes you may want to say both. So I think in the ancient world the usage slides to and fro I don't think there is bothered about it as we are and I think we ought again to be careful I'm perfectly happy to cash out where until very recently actually it's a very very modern thing.

Probably as recently as the late 1970s the early 1980s when people suddenly realized that if I look out at a congregation and say now my brothers the women will think well what about us then because until the late 70s early 80s that wasn't the case women were quite used to the word brothers being a universal address. Likewise the word man and men did not used to offend people did not use to offend either men or women as though it was specific to males. Whereas you might find more frequently these days people tend to use human kinds man kind.

Yes, Lewis does that and it's interesting for Lewis is a very very highly sophisticated user of words when he talks about human and humankind. I think he's realized already there might just be a problem about going with the older usage. Yes, there you go.

Look let's get into some of the sort of specifics of how an emotional level this works and you've sort of already hinted at this in your first answer Tom but Michael in Melbourne Australia says I apologize for the length of this question. And I know Tom Wright cannot

act as my pastor. However, I believe my struggle and question may be relevant for other listeners.

I grew up with a punitive angry father and an emotionally neglectful mother. I have a significant struggle with trust as a result. So how can I heal from my distrust of God who I often see as responsible for not stepping in and protecting me as a vulnerable child.

Is he punishing me to the third and fourth generation for the sins of my parents and grandparents. Is it my responsibility to pick myself up and muster some faith and blindly trust. My wife encourages me that God sat with me in that place of abuse as a child and grieved.

Even if that is true it seems to me that God is holding me responsible for not having faith and won't help me until I start being more faithful in trust. And this sort of comes around to the fact that this listener Michael finds it difficult to speak of God as a father because of their own experience of having an ability to be. Is it a sense of having an abusive father? Yeah, I get that and I have met this sort of situation pastorally before and it's very, very sad.

I remember one person that my wife and I were trying to counsel who had had very negative experiences with parents and who in consequence was finding it really difficult to have any kind of warm response to God, God's self. If I can use the God's self language and it really appears that for some people the level of emotional response has been so squashed or crushed or damaged by all sorts of things that have happened to them through as we say no fault of their own. That they do not, they are not able to feel the joy and liberation and this a sense of God smiling at them which many other people do feel.

And part of me wants to say that's okay God understands all of that. That may not help but it's a way of saying we're always in danger of imagining it to be a real Christian, you're supposed to feel happy and content and knowing exactly where you are with God all the time. And quite clearly in the Psalms that simply isn't the case and I would say to such a person please use the Psalms and when you find Psalms which are about lamenting the apparent absence of God and finding it difficult to trust God and shaking the fist in God's face and saying why is all this going on, have I done something wrong, take some some like 44 and just pray that again and again.

That's okay. The Psalms are there for us to inhabit and they give us a place to go and live spiritually emotionally when we are in these particular different moods or situations. After all throughout human history terrible things have been done by rulers, by parents, by authority figures to small people who then grow up scarred and damaged by them.

It's happening to this day in many countries alas and the whole refugee crisis is going to produce an entire generation of people who are lost and alone and wondering who on

earth they are and so on. And I want to say God embraces all of that but the embrace of God doesn't mean that they will all immediately become happy contented Western style Christians. No, it just doesn't work like that.

God's embrace should be the embrace of the whole church assuring people by the welcome to them which the church offers and the ready acceptance of them and the sharing in fellowship with them that whatever is going on in the turmoil emotionally. And this is something which we in the modern West have been very bad at because we've thought individually about I am a Christian so I should have this relationship with God. Oh yeah, I go to church on Sundays or I go to a fellowship group but that's just kind of to get together for fun on the side.

No, the whole point of the church Romans 14 and 15 is that the welcome we offer one another including those who are broken and damaged for whatever reason. That welcome is the literal embodiment by the spirit of God's love and it's within that context that people sometimes not always can then find that bit by bit little by little. They are as it were warmed up and able to trust and able to believe in a way which without that simply wouldn't be the case.

Yeah, thank you thank you so much for your question Michael and as ever as you've rightly acknowledged yourself we can only give a brief answer here. Do find the the wise counsel of a perhaps a Christian counselor someone who can help you walk through these issues yourself in your life but but our prayers are with you. Hi there before we go any further I want you to know about a very special ebook we're releasing this month called Critical Race Theory and Christianity.

This ebook draws from two unbelievable podcasts with Neil Shenvie, Razzleberry, Owen Strand and Jermaine Marshall addressing questions like has so-called woke ideology taken over parts of the church or is white privilege a problem in the church and is critical race theory compatible with the gospel. I'd love for you to have a copy of this powerful ebook as my special thanks to you for your gift to Premier Insight today the ministry that brings you this podcast each week. You see all of the conversations, insight, resources and encouragement that you get from Premier Insight programs like this one are only possible because of the support of wonderful friends like you.

Without your generosity none of this would be possible so please go to premierinsight.org/give and make a donation today that's premierinsight.org/give and don't forget to download our newest ebook Critical Race Theory and Christianity as my special thank you. Final question here and it's really the same question from two different people it's about the fact that Jesus encourages us to pray to the father but Dawood in Malumba sorry Dawood Malumba in Oxford and Daniel in New York both have similar questions here. Dawood asks the Lord's Prayer directs Christians on how to pray and Jesus appears to guide them to direct their prayers to the father but why if Jesus directs

Christians to address their prayers to the father why do I hear Christians praying directly to Jesus? Is it the Christians don't understand the Trinity and a similar ish question again from Daniel in New York.

My question is on our relationship to God the father through God the son John 14 six says no one comes to the father except through me. Does that mean when we pray to the father that we pray through Jesus or did Jesus in his incarnation open up a direct line between us and the father or are these just different ways of describing the same thing so yes go ahead. These are great questions and the great Christian tradition says you pray to the father through the son in the power of the spirit and there is a kind of logic to that and then the logic seems to disappear already in the New Testament when some of the early Christians invoke Jesus as Lord and say our Lord come Mara Natha that is a prayer to Jesus that he will come and at the end of the book of Revelation the spirit and the bride say come that is a prayer to Jesus that he will return that he will reappear.

And so it's as though Jesus becomes the lens through which we see the father but as we're looking at Jesus it makes sense to invoke him as well and simply calling on Jesus as kirios Lord is a form of the father. He is a way is a form of prayer and so when you get it throughout the gospels when Peter is sinking in the water and he says Lord save me from very early on in the church that is interpreted as a prayer to Jesus. He is a word that is addressed as kirios which in Greek can just mean master or sir but is also the word which in the Old Testament Greek translates the personal name of God Yahweh that every tongue should confess kirios is Christos that Jesus Messiah is Lord in the sense of the God of the Old Testament.

Now the question of the Trinity is actually well approached through prayer. I've talked in the answer to a previous question about that amazing passage in Romans eight where our prayers are somehow the place where the Holy Spirit comes and prays within us and the spirit praying to the father forms us according to the shape and pattern of the son. And that mystery of how prayer means that we are somehow caught up as part of God's triune life which seems very scary and odd but that has actually been taken up in the Eastern Christian tradition particularly where the prayer of many, many Eastern Orthodox saints and Holy people has actually been a sense of being part of the inner life of God and it's out of that tradition that you then find the so called Jesus prayer Lord Jesus Christ son of the living God have mercy on me a sinner.

I know some Christians who say well that's a bit off because we really should be praying to the father. People who have used the Jesus prayer a great deal I think of the late great Bishop Simon Barrington Ward lovely wonderful deeply spiritual man Simon practice the Jesus prayer day by day by day and he was he was a luminous saint if I can put it like that. There was a sense of stillness and wisdom and happiness and glory about him and for him that Jesus prayer was not praying to Jesus over against praying to the father it was a way of praying through Jesus in the power of the spirit in the presence of the

father.

And so I think we shouldn't be too fussy about have we got our Trinitarian theology right at this point as though the important thing was to get the theology right rather than the prayer right. The prayer is absolutely central and I would say there's a deep mystery there and what I do find awkward is when people praying allowed without really thinking about it switch to and fro in the same sentence between addressing Jesus and addressing the father. I vividly remember somebody who I knew and loved starting off a prayer Lord Jesus I heavenly father and I remember thinking no can't do that.

But but people refer carelessly and I think we need to be disciplined and wise about our prayer life because it does reflect what we what we really believe. Well thanks for all the questions today on issues around the fatherhood of God as ever if you want to get in touch with the show. You can do that through the website will make sure to announce it at the end of today's program and you can send your own questions in but for now thank you very much from one father to another Tom on this occasion for being with us and we'll see you next time.

Thank you. Thank you for being with us on this week's show next time forgiveness is what we're talking about things like is there an unforgivable sin. Do we forfeit God's forgiveness if we don't forgive and what about those who die without accepting Christ do they get a second chance at forgiveness.

Look forward to joining us for that one same time next week. All of Tom's teaching from unbelievable the conference earlier in the year is available of course if you want to get your hands on that then why not go to the link with today's show and get hold of it was a wonderful day of teaching Q&A conversations with people like Tom Holland so again that's with today's show. And if you want more from the show ask ntwrite.com is the place to go we'd love to send you our show ebook if you're able to support us as well.

All of the links from today's show notes for now thanks for being with us see you next time.

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