

Jacquelyn Grant*

The Power of Language And the Language of [Em]Power[ment]

In any given context consisting of a variety of people and perspectives from different places and positions we find a variety of views on any given topic. Certainly this is true on the question of inclusive language. Perspectives may range from those who are actively committed to language revision, to those who fail to see the relevancy of the issues, to those who adamantly challenge the audacity of women to raise such issues.

So, notwithstanding the fact that what follows in this essay will in some instances be preaching to the already converted, I hope to be able at least to raise for consideration and discussion some of the issues, and the significance of those issues in the Church and the larger society. The already converted, and those who are open to being converted, are the persons who readily listen to and are prepared to affirm these analyses and challenges. Or at least they are amenable to the possibility of being convinced that the arguments for inclusive language are valid and need to be taken seriously.

I am reminded of my old critique of Black and other ethnic studies programs in seminary and college/university contexts across the country. The people who take the courses offered in these programs tend to be those who are liberal enough to at least recognize the need for change, even if they themselves are only willing to make superficial changes. The ones for whom the courses would be of greatest benefit—for raised consciousness which might be expected to influence changed behavior—are not always open even to the

* Jacquelyn Grant is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and Director of Black Women in Church and Society at the ITC.

transforming possibilities of the Spirit. In the same vein, concerning the matter of language, the varying degrees of openness to the subject is dependent upon whether or not one has decided to *catch* the spirit or *control* the spirit, or fear those who are in control of the spirit. I continue to hear the stories of women in the ministry and women seminarians who find it impossible to understand the relevancy of inclusive language. For example, I was told a few years ago by a clergywoman, "I asked a couple of women in ministry in Alabama if they knew Dr. Jacquelyn Grant. One responded, "Oh you mean that woman who is trying to change the sex of God?" (Laughter) Trying to change the sex of God? Could they not see that if they are concerned about the sex of God being changed, they must have already internalized a male God which they find difficult to give up. In effect, they have already limited God.

I continue to be amazed at the unwillingness, and sometimes inability, of women seminarians and clergy to see and understand the need for reforming religious and theological language. Is it, I ask myself, that they are simply unable to perceive how the prevailing theological symbolism and language work in their disfavor?

Because of my regular participation in a local church, and conducting seminars, workshops, and lecturing and preaching across the country, I am very much in touch with what many church people are thinking—or more accurately—what they are *not* thinking about. It is clear that inclusive language is one of those things about which the majority of people is not thinking. Many would see what they would call preoccupation with inclusive language as trivial, if, in fact, not totally inconsequential. And so it is conceivable that even in enlightened sectors of the general population there are those who may respond in similar ways.

My rejoinder to this kind of thinking is that if the issue of language is so unimportant, so insignificant, so trivial, why does it cause such a stir when merely raised for consideration. If it does not matter that generic language is male, or that God is spoken of in

terms of male imagery, then it should equally not matter if these words and images were changed, or rendered interchangeable with feminine words and imageries. If nothing else, reactions demonstrate to us that "it makes a difference."

What difference do words make? What images do we create in our use of language/words? What does language suggest about human beings, about God? My response to these and other questions which I will raise during the next few pages comes out of the perspective of one womanist who is consistently involved in analyzing the situation of African American women in the church and society. In reflecting upon these questions, I explore some of the issues that are important to me as a womanist theologian.

The Power of Language

When met with the challenge, many would argue for the purity and objectivity of language that comes, they argue, from "natural developments."¹ This makes it difficult if not impossible for them to see the problem. Work in this area then, is seen as "tampering' with the language." An exploration into the history of the use of the male gender as generic, for example, demonstrates how language is anything but "natural." Language is contrived, it is designed, often for specific purposes. Emswiler and Emswiler draw our attention to four incidents in the history of the development of sexist language.² (1) In 1553 Thomas Wilson argued "before an almost exclusively male audience in England" that it was more natural that man precede woman in writing or speaking. That is, one should say "husband and wife" and not "wife and husband." This, of course, is merely reflective of the natural superiority of men over

¹ Sharon Neuffer Emswiler and Thomas Neuffer Emswiler, *Women and Worship: A Guide To Non-Sexist Hymns, Prayers, And Liturgies* (New York: Harper and Row, publishers, 1974), p. 11.

² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

women. (2) Building upon this notion, by 1646 Joshua Poole was arguing that the male should take the "pride of place," because the male gender is the "worthier" gender. (3) In 1746 John Kirkby in his "Eighty-Eight Grammatical Rules" included Rule #21 which stated that the male gender was "more comprehensive" than the female gender. This moved the argument a bit further, from the mere notion that the male is better, more important, preferable, to the notion that the male is universal. (4) Finally, in 1850 an Act of Parliament stated that legally, the word "he" stood for "she." What we see here in these selected moments in the history of sexist language is the process of the institutionalization of so-called generic/universal language as male language. Frank and Treichler in their volume *Language, Gender and Professional Writing*, provide some insights into how this generic language worked.

The use of male "generics" is not free from social and political influences. As Charlotte Carmichael Stopes points out in her 1908 history of the words 'man' and 'woman' in British charters and statutes, "'man' always includes 'woman' when there is a penalty to be incurred [but] it never includes 'women' when there is a privilege to be conferred." Similarly, an 1872 feminist tract on the political disabilities of women (preserved in the Fawcett Library, London) observes that "[w]ords [like 'he' and 'man'] importing the masculine gender [have been held in court] to include women in the clauses imposing burdens, and to exclude them in the clauses conferring privileges, in one and the same Act of Parliament" A case in point, detailed by Mary Roth Walsh, was the debate over the admission of women physicians into the Massachusetts Medical Society between 1850 and 1880; opposition rested firmly on the interpretation of 'he,' 'man' and 'person' in the bylaws as sex-specific—that is, as meaning "men only." During World

War I, the U.S War Department equated 'persons' with 'men' preventing women physicians from becoming officers; during the critical shortages of World War II, however—and in response to an intensive lobbying campaign by women physicians—this interpretation was declared "mid-Victorian" and 'persons' was taken to include women. Walsh's book takes its title from an ironic and bitter 1946 newspaper advertisement protesting postwar sex discrimination against women physicians: "Doctors Wanted: Women Need Not Apply"; the apparently generic word 'doctor' had in fact become sex-specific, once again designating only men.³

It is clear that language, contrary to the opinion of many, is not merely an expression of thought, but language *forms* thoughts, ideas and images. As such it is a powerful tool. Language can be used to build community or to destroy it. It can affirm humanity or deny it. It can include or exclude. It can empower or disempower. It should be obvious, therefore, that the control of language via creation and definition makes for the control of people. It assists the process of keeping certain people in their prescribed place. It orchestrates peoples' feelings about themselves and about others.

Language As A Theological Issue

As a womanist challenging the Black Church in particular and the larger Church in general, I customarily remind Black women and men that we as African Americans are not unfamiliar with the power of language when negatively applied to (or against) a people by virtue of who they are. In other words, we have been this way before. Black people have been victimized by another

³ Francine W. Frank, et. al., *Language, Gender And Professional Writing: Theoretical Approaches and Guidelines for Non-Sexist Usage* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1989), p. 4.

imposed universalized experience. In my *Systematic Theology* class, I generally give a talk about the importance of language in order to indicate that inclusive language will be used in all work done in the class. For the first time this year, however, I included a section entitled "Language as a Theological Issue." In order to get students to understand the problem, I do comparative reflections demonstrating how language has been used against Black peoples. Since the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta is a predominantly African American institution, many of our students are able to understand the power of language from their own experience of being an African American person in a racist society. In American society, to be Black is to be bad, inferior, evil, less than . . . It is to be criminal, to be on the dark side of life. This, as compared to what it means to be the more normative, universal White. To be White is to be good, superior, angelic, more than . . . It is to be the definers of what and who is criminal. It is to be on the light side of life. It is the preferred existence. If one is not White, then the goal is to be as close to White as possible. These stereotypes have been so ingrained in our society that they are bought into by many Whites and Blacks alike. The power of language is of such force that it undergirds the social, political and economic interests of the powerful. Is it not conceivable then that just as language has been used against Blacks, it has been used against women as well?

This fact indicates to me as a womanist, therefore, that the question is much larger than the question of sexist language. Just as we see in the development of sexist language, one could consider the development of White language/experience as universal. For example, history for so long meant real history, that is to say, the history of White people. Liberation movements have called our attention to the histories/stories of various peoples. A part of the liberation struggles is the development of a language that fosters rather than stifles the process of liberation.

The Power of Oppressive Language

In actuality, my primary concern, obviously, is one of oppressive language in our churches and society. Elsewhere I have discussed my views about the nature of oppressive language and the challenges facing the Church and society today. In an essay entitled "Come To My Help Lord, for I'm In Trouble . . ." ⁴, I deal with the issue of oppressive language in the larger theological and christological contexts. Three areas in which it is evident that oppressive language serves the purpose of reinforcing oppressive structures are race relations, class relations, and sex/gender or male/female relations.

(1) The problem with race relations is that we live in a society where White supremacy ideology yet reigns. It is infinitely better to be White than it is to be Black. This notion is still manifested in all aspects of life. Even in spite of most recent political gains, Black people are still measurably weaker than their White counterparts. Economically, although we find pockets of middle class Blacks, the masses of Black people are still disproportionately poor. Even in cities like Atlanta where political leadership is overwhelmingly Black, as is the population, the economic power base is still overwhelmingly White. Our histories and herstories are still written from the perspectives of the conquerors—those in power. What this means is that the negative and positive social, political, economic, historical, and psychological imageries are reflected theologically. Because, as mentioned above, White supremacy mandates that Black denotes evil and White denotes good, it follows that God, by necessity, is associated with that which is good, pure, and

⁴ Jacquelyn Grant, "Come to My Help Lord For I'm in Trouble: Womanist Jesus and the Mutual Struggle for Liberation," in Maryann Stevens (ed.) *Reconstructing The Christ Symbol: Essays In Feminist Christology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993).

clean. And, of course, God is imaged as White. So many church people, we note, continue to sing, "God wash me whiter than snow." A language that perpetuates this black/white dualism undergirds this oppressive imagery. The oppressive language of White supremacy needs to be abandoned.

(2) The problem of class relations is certainly not helped by our insistence on servanthood language in the Christian tradition. Because of our tendency to use the sacred only to advance the secular when convenient for the political interests of those in power, servanthood language has been used to further enslave the enslaved. It has provided an incredible opportunity for theological double-talk. Whereas we are all, as followers of Jesus Christ, servants striving to manifest Christ in our lives, it is also true that "some folks are always more servant than others" by political, economic location, and so-called theological designation. Black men are still servants of servants, White women are still servants of servants, and Black women are still servants of the servants of servants.

It may be well to call a moratorium on the use of servanthood language among poor and oppressed peoples, even though we might want to continue it in and among the communities of the White, rich, and powerful. Perhaps this would free us to new possibilities for languaging, imaging, and imagining ourselves as well as our divinities.

(3) The problem of sex/gender or male/female relations stems from the fact that patriarchy advocates male supremacy and female allegiance to that supremacy. That which is male is considered better, stronger, greater, smarter, and, therefore, the one who is to be in authority over all others. That which is normative, then, is to be found in that which is male. What is required is the elimination of gender dualisms which keep us man/male in our social analysis and theology. Sexist/male language that undergirds oppressive male/female relationships must be eradicated in order to pave the way for new ways of languaging, imaging, and imagining humanity

and divinity.

What is being argued here is that oppression has been institutionalized through structures, and language is one of the primary ways in which these structures have been upheld. What good does it do to say that we are not racist, or sexist, or classist when efforts to see the divine in all of humanity is met with disdain. Why does it elicit responses like "you're preaching hatred," or "you're stirring up the trouble," or "everything would be fine if you would stop talking about it."

What could it mean theologically to give up investments in racist, sexist, and classist language? It means that we would be free to re-image and to re-imagine both humanity and divinity.

A Language of [Em]power[ment]

The critical question that we should wrestle with is how shall we imagine divinity, and how shall we speak? A large sector of the feminist movement has been about recovering much of the lost traditions of women and the feminine, seeking to make visible biblical and historic manifestations of the divine feminine, or the divine in feminine form. A significant part of this quest for the feminine divinity is the revision of language, i.e., the way we speak about divinity. It becomes just as important to see the mother as it is to see the father in divinity. Or to put it another way, God is as much mother as God is father. The male aspect of God can no longer be universalized.

At the same time language applied to humanity must also be revised to reflect the totality of humanity. The male experience can no longer be normalized as universal. On the other hand, the feminine must be elevated and thus imbued with power.

Womanist biblical scholar Clarice J. Martin puts the challenge this way:

We must "widen the margins" of the language and imagery that we use for God. This means that we must consciously incorporate the whole range of imagery and metaphor for God available to us in scripture, including feminine and masculine imagery, and the imagery for God that is not gender-related. The impetus for this conscious "readjustment" of the margins or limits of our theological discourse about God is prompted not only by major societal shifts toward more inclusive language usage for females and males in the public and private spheres. More important, the use of inclusive language is rooted in the biblical witness itself. The church is called to be faithful to all of scripture used to talk to God and about God. Only then can our creeds, prayers, hymns, educational curricula, and other forms of communicative discourse in our corporate life represent the richness and wealth mirrored in scripture itself.⁵

If in scripture, we find presentations of the divinities, employing both feminine and masculine imageries, why is it so unthinkable that God could be just as much mother as God is father? Critics of this line of argument are fond of asking: "If it is problematic to speak of God as father, isn't it equally problematic to speak of 'him' as mother?"

Indeed, it is if, in fact, one merely covers the masculine "him/he" with the word "mother" or "she/her;" or if one merely substitutes the image "mother" for the image "father." A God exclusively mother is just as problematic as a God exclusively father. It is reasonable to project that God is both/and more . . . That is to say, God is mother and father, and God is much beyond what we

⁵ Clarice J. Martin, "Inclusive Language and the Brief Statement of Faith: Widening the Margin in our Common Confession," in Jack C. Stotts and Jane Dempsey Douglas (eds.) *To Confess The Faith Today* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990). In the quote cited, Dr. Martin refers to a work by Casey Miller and Kate Smith and to *Opening the Door*, a 1975 resource document of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.

understand as mother and father. To put the matter differently, God is feminine and masculine and much, much more. Jann Clanton, in her book *In Whose Image?* pointedly asks, "If God can include three persons, can't God include two genders?"⁶ In other words, if God can be three-in-one, as believers in the Trinity confess, then certainly, God can be two-in-one, masculine and feminine. The one is no more miraculous than the other. Perhaps we have reached the *kairos*, the appointed time, the moment when we would benefit from another Ecumenical Council to further explore the issues of Nicea and Chalcedon. How shall we understand the Godhead? How shall we understand the Jesus or the Christ event?

Some years ago, I acknowledged the model of William Eichelberger, who was able to see God in some respects in radically non-traditional ways:

God, in revealing Himself and His attributes from time to time in His creaturely existence, has exercised His freedom to formalize His appearance in a variety of ways.... God revealed Himself at a point in the past as Jesus the Christ, a Black male...I am constrained to believe that God in our times has updated His form of revelation to western society...God is now manifesting Himself...in the form of the Black American Woman as mother, as wife, as nourisher, sustainer and preserver of life...The Black Woman has born our grief and carried our sorrows...It appears that she may be the instrumentality through whom God will make us whole.⁷

Though there are traditional notions in midst of the non-

⁶ Jann Aldredge Clanton, *In Whose Image?* (New York: Crossroad Press, 1990), Chapter 4, *passim*.

⁷ William Eichelberger, "Reflections on the Person and Personality of the Black Messiah", *The Black Church*, n.d., p. 54.

traditional, the point here is to free God from the limitations and imprisonment of human thoughts and language. If Christian doctrine is true, then God is so great that God defies all human imprisonment. We are given to believe that God is all-perfect in power, presence, and wisdom. Yet we insist on putting God in a box — a *male* box. Sojourner Truth marvelled as she continually experienced the expansiveness of God. She exclaimed, “God I didn’t know you were so big!!!” In the tradition of Negro Spiritual and Black Gospel music, “God is so high, you can’t get over, so low you can’t get under, so wide, you can’t get around, you must come in by the door”.

Coming in by the door means that you must meet God where God is, not via the tunnel of racist, sexist, classist, or any other oppressive ideology.

In his sermon “The Everywhereness of God,” Gardner C. Taylor asked with the Psalmist:

Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depth, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. (Psalm 139-7-10 NIV)⁸

If God is everywhere, how can we contain God in words and concepts? Language which is exclusive limits human possibilities. Exclusive language is an attempt by human beings to limit and control other human beings. Further, and even more scandalous, such exclusive/oppressive language is the human’s attempt to limit and control God. Theological language is at best symbolic, as any language is symbolic. Any attempt to make it more than that borders on linguistic idolatry.

⁸ A sermon preached by Dr. Taylor in the ITC Chapel.

The task of womanist theologians is to recognize the power of language; to overcome the power of oppressive language; and to effect the [em]power[ment] of liberating language about humanity and about God.