

MOTHER GOD? WHY NOT...

It's time to recall the reasons feminist God-language is a kind of heresy and why the gospel itself is at stake in God's name. Below are excerpts from essays by Robert Jenson and Gerhard Forde on this question:

Robert W. Jenson: “Whether we regard the inherited Trinitarian name for God, ‘Father, Son and Spirit,” as masculinist language and so indeed as rightly offensive to feminists, and whether we regard our language about God as malleable to our sensibilities and reformable when it offends them, both **depend on what we think we are doing when we talk to or about God...**

“In the theses prepared for debate at Heidelberg in 1518 in which Martin Luther laid out his deepest theological concerns, Luther contrasted the standard construal of our knowledge of God with that which he took to be true. The eternal God being ‘invisible,’ we begin with what we can see, the temporal world around us. Of this world, we discover that it contains no sufficient reason for its own reality. Discontented with this discovery, we are launched on a process of thought, questing for the absent reason of things. As this quest succeeds, we come into position to see the initially invisible God – though this seeing is now mystic and nothing like the experience of the visible world with which we began.

“**Luther’s thesis** captures religion’s construal of its knowledge of God. By this construal, a sentence like ‘God loves’ works as an image or a metaphor. What we talk about is never directly God. Thus all our words, such as ‘love,’ are strictly inapplicable to God. If we say ‘God loves,’ this is a projection onto the eternity we seek to populate.

God has made himself one of the visible temporal objects of our world: Jesus hanging on a cross.

“It will be our decision which of our words we project on eternity and what metaphors we work with. There is one limitation: We will choose from those words that denote some value in this world. Our vocabulary for God will reveal what we value in this world. Our use, for example, of ‘love’ for God will reflect back to mark love as a chief good among us.

“**We look around for what we like about ourselves and then say God must be like that.** So, since we like power, we call God ‘omnipotent.’ So – to get to the controversial matter – if we honor fatherhood over motherhood, we will want to call God

‘Father’ rather than ‘Mother.’ If we honor motherhood over fatherhood, we will want to call God ‘Mother’ rather than ‘Father.’ If we are grandly impartial, we will invent words like ‘Mother-Father.’ If I am most comforted by my own gender, I – being male – will want a male God. If, as is more usual, I value more the opposite gender, I – being male – will want a female God.....

“But still the question is: Can a description of how religion’s God-talk normally works be an **adequate description of Christian God-talk?** May not Christianity’s peculiarity be precisely the way it talks of God? ...

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“**Luther** thought so. According to him, **the entire moral-religious construal of our God-talk is opposite to that imposed and enabled by the gospel.** In his thesis 19, Luther called religion’s standard way ‘**the theology of glory.**’ It is our final way to glorify ourselves, by projecting our own valued characteristics on the screen of eternity. It is the very heart of *self-righteousness*....

“So what construal of our talk of God does the gospel enable and impose? In his 20th Heidelberg thesis, **Luther** evoked it in **point-for-point antithesis to his description of ordinary religion.** Christians speak of God not in the quest for a God absent from our **temporal world** but rather in the attempt to reckon with a **God all too obtrusively present in it.** God has made himself one of the visible temporal objects of our world: **Jesus hanging on a cross.**

“There is, therefore, no religions quest to embark upon. This vision of God is given prior to all our searchings, indeed **in opposition to our searchings.** This does not mean there is no cognitive work to be done. There is an eternity’s hard labor of understanding imposed by the fact that **God makes himself our object** at all, and moreover **a suffering and disgraced object.** This offends all our religious sensibilities: the object that is **God blockades our projections, and there is no way to glorify ourselves by staring at a hanged felon.** The offense, indeed, is the point. Luther calls this

the **'theology of the cross,'** meaning a crucifying theology.

"It is the epistemological version of the gospel, as understood by the Reformation: You do not need to project yourself to envision God. **You do not need to have a God who looks like you, and you do not need to find yourself in God. You can find God in God,** an actual Other, who can rule you when you are in rebellion, bring you to heaven when you are bent on hell, love you when you rightly despise yourself. You can find yourself in yourself, not a weak reflection of God but a full-blooded creature, a different sort of being than God, with your own proper worth. This is Christianity's peculiarity....

"It all comes down to this. Do we seek ourselves in God and so name him? Or does God seek us in the cross, and so name himself, contingently, historically, unsatisfactorily, beyond our values?"

(Jenson, "Trinitarian Naming and Sexist Sensibility" *Entree*, October 1985. Full text available at our website, www.crossalone.us)

Gerhard O. Forde: "So there was a man named **Jesus**, sent from God, who came among us and named God 'my Father' – indeed, even *the* Father' – and **invited us to pray with him to this God as 'our Father.'** We should not imagine that this naming of God was received either with approval or with great joy. Quite the contrary. Of the gospels, John sets forth most profoundly what is involved in the problem of naming God. It is pointed out that **Jesus' compatriots sought to kill him 'because he not only broke the sabbath but also called God his own father, making himself equal with God'** (5:18). And in the end, to put the matter directly, he was killed for calling God his Father: 'We have a law, and by that law he ought to die, because he has made himself the Son of God'" (19:7).

The Father vindicated him, establishing his authority as the Son.

But he was **raised from the dead. The Father vindicated him,** establishing his authority as the Son. What is established thereby is the specific and intimate relation between the Father and the Son. **The Father can be understood only in terms of the relation to the Son: God is the Father of Jesus Christ.** As we read in John 'No one has ever seen God' the only Son, who is in the bosom of the

Father, he has made him known' (1:18). The Son, in turn, is the perfect revelation of the Father. The Son can do and does 'only what he sees the Father doing' (5:19). That is, God is not to be named in analogy to human fathers, not in terms of abstractions like 'fatherhood,' but only in relation to Jesus Christ. The name God acquires for himself is strictly and exclusively 'the Father of Jesus Christ,' and one can rightly call God 'Father' only as one is properly related to the Son (8:41-44).....But is it not possible to substitute other less offensive names or metaphors?.... we have the fact of the revealed God to take into account....

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"First of all, we have to do with revelation in time, through **historical particularity.** We have to do with a Jew in first-century Palestine who called God his Father and who has invited us to pray on his warrant (in his name) to God as our Father. This man was raised from the dead by 'the Father.' We need no longer 'trouble deaf heaven with our bootless cries.' We have been given an address for our pleas.....There is no exhaustively necessary reason we can cite to show why Jesus should have used this language. The fact is simply that he did. If he had called God 'the Mother' or 'the Great Spirit' or any number of other things, we would no doubt be obligated to that. But he didn't.....

In the person of Jesus in his historical particularity, God is revealed.

"So in the end it all comes down to **a matter of the gospel.** The one who is above us is simply an intractable problem for us. We cannot penetrate or remove the threatening masks behind which God absconds. But **in the person of Jesus** in his historical particularity, **God is revealed.** He dies for us. If we are antipathetic toward God, God bears it all in Jesus. God goes out of the way for us, refuses finally to be a God of wrath for us. But this is possible only in the concrete historical person of Jesus. It is only in him that we are reconciled to God. **Only in him do we find God the true Father of us all.**

(Forde, "Naming the One Who is Above Us," *Speaking the Christian God*, ed. Alvin F. Kimel, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans [1992]110-19).