

# Is God Male?

By Kyle Pope

The *Kansas City Star*, in their weekend “Faith” section posed this question to a denominational preacher and a Jewish rabbi - “Should we refer to God as he, she or it, and why?” Although the two writers approached the question from different angles they both reached about the same conclusion. They suggested that it doesn’t really matter which pronoun one “chooses” because the Bible uses female and male metaphors to describe attributes of God. It seems to me that the whole issue reflects some fundamental problems which were ignored.

**I. Human Gender.** When God created human beings as well as animals he made them “male and female” (Genesis 1:27; 5:2; 6:19). These distinctions are essential for earthly reproduction. What determines whether one is male or female is a matter of physiology, chemistry and anatomy. In most creatures, if the creature has male organs, and an X and a Y chromosome it is a male. If the creature has female organs and two X chromosomes it is a female.

The Bible does not teach that God reproduces, has a mate or gender distinctive reproductive organs or chromosomes. God is spirit (John 4:24). Never the less the Bible does use masculine names and pronouns to refer to God. Yet, just as the descriptions of God and Jesus as “Father” and “Son” reflect something different than the human reproductive relationship, any description of gender must be understood in a different sense than earthly concepts of gender.

**II. Bible Names for Bible Things.** What is strange is the fact that both authors treated this issue as a matter of human choice. A world which imagines that it can choose its own worship, doctrine and behavior imagines that it can choose to characterize God as it sees fit. The real

question is how does God refer to Himself? Genesis 1:27 is the earliest passage where this question is addressed in relation to earthly gender. The text reads - “**So God created man in His [own] image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.**” (Genesis 1:27, NKJV). Several elements of the this text are important. First, the name “God” is translated from the Hebrew word **אֱלֹהִים** *elohim*. Hebrew, like most languages distinguishes nouns as either grammatically masculine or feminine. The name *elohim* is masculine. Next, we should note the verb “created.” Unlike English, Hebrew verbs have forms that not only communicate person (i.e. first person - “I,” second person - “you,” or third person - “he, she or it”) but also gender (i.e. if the “you” is male or female, or if the third person is masculine “he” or feminine “she”). In this text the verb translated “created” is the Hebrew word **יָצַר** *yivrah*, the masculine singular form, meaning literally “he created.” Finally, we note the phrase “His [own] image.” Hebrew communicates the pronoun “His” with a suffix attached to the end of the noun “image.” In this case the pronoun is the third person masculine “He.”

If we are to refer to God as He refers to Himself we must speak in the masculine. Anything else is not a matter of “choice” but change.

**III. Biblical Distinctions.** It is clear that both men and women are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), but it is also clear that the Bible teaches that there is some sense in which there is a distinction in the nature of this likeness (or reflected glory) as it pertains to man and woman.

In Paul’s first epistle to the Corinthians he is forced to address the problem that some in Corinth were having honoring gender roles in

Christ. Some of the women in Corinth seem to have been rejecting a custom widely practiced in that day as a sign of submission to male authority - the wearing of a head covering. To remedy this Paul appeals to creation itself. The apostle writes through the Holy Spirit - **“For a man indeed ought not to cover [his] head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man is not from woman, but woman from man. Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man.”** (I Corinthians 11:7-9).

In this text Paul appeals to the sequence of creation (i.e. man was created first) and then the means of creation (i.e. woman from man's rib) to suggest a distinction between God's likeness and glory to man and to woman. In the context man is the glory of God and woman is the glory of man.

This does not suggest any devaluation of women, it is simply a matter of sequence, relationship and authority. However, it does suggest a distinction that cannot be ignored without disregarding a portion of Scripture.

**IV. Modern Gender Wars.** It is little wonder that a generation that seeks to make women act like men and men act like women would seek to entangle God in the same gender wars that so plague our world. Does this question really stem from a desire to characterize God accurately, or does it come from the politically correct tendency towards feminism? It seems to me that many in our world are simply uncomfortable with accepting what the Bible teaches about creation, male and female roles and God's hand in both.

If Scripture refers to God in the masculine does this insult woman? Of course not! God is the Creator of both sexes. If man was created first, and woman was created from man, does God love woman less? Of course not! Jesus died for both men and women. If God has established different roles of authority and responsibility for men and women is God abusing women? Of course not! It is no more an abuse of women that they are not given the role of headship in the home (Ephesians 5:22,23) than it is abusing men that they are not given the ability to bear children (Genesis 3:16).