

It's Up to You 2026 (Week 4) - Is God Make? What should I make of all the male language about God in the Bible?

Yesterday's Sermon Summary

1. So much has been researched and written on this topic that we tried to organize a succinct response by answering three "questions behind the question," the first of which is to ask not what we notice in the scriptural text but what would have caught the attention of the original hearers/audience in the ancient world?

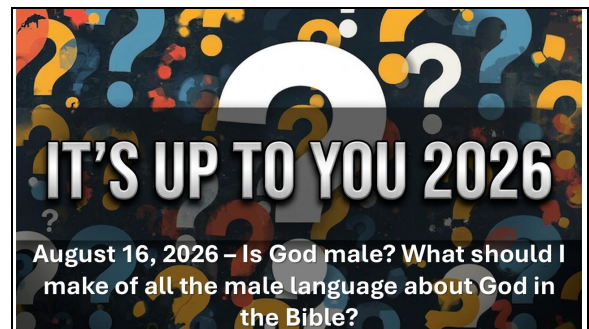
2. For example, the creation account in Genesis includes this claim, "So God created humans in His image; in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them" (Gen. 1.27). Two features would have stood out about that verse in the ancient world, in fact that they are unique theological claims of the Hebrew scriptures: a) that we see God in women as much as in men, and b) that there is only one God, and that the one God is seen equally in men and women, or in that which is masculine and feminine.

3. When we read scripture, we often notice all the male imagery and terminology for God. In the ancient world, it would have been the opposite - the regular use of feminine analogies and language for the one true or high God would have seemed unprecedented. E.g., God is like a mother bear (Hosea 13.8), like a woman giving birth (Numbers 11.12), like a nursing mother (Isaiah 49.15), like a midwife (Psalm 22.9), and so on. Thus, as O.T. scholar Phyllis Trible concludes, to reduce the God of the Bible to a deity that is primarily male is to misread scripture.

4. It's also important to remember that, as O.T. scholar John Walton puts it, scripture is for us, but it is not written by us nor to us. That means we need to pay close attention to its historical and cultural setting (as some of our own PCUSA creeds tell; see The Confession of 1967, section 9.29). So, in regard to today's question, some of the patriarchal assumptions and norms of ancient culture is bound to show up, e.g. using "father" to speak to God's role protecting and providing for His children or needing to call Jesus "God's Son" because only sons could act on their father's behalf and inherit a father's estate.

5. A second "question behind the question" would be - do we adequately grasp the limitations of human language, especially about God? The PCUSA's Declaration of Faith (1977) in section 1.2 reminds us that God "far exceeds all that our words can say." At best, our metaphors and descriptive terms for God are gestures in God's direction; they do not capture God entirely. In fact, God's clearest act of self-expression is not a bunch of words; it's a life, Jesus Christ, that we can observe, imitate, hear, etc.

6. No one image or term for God is sufficient. And herein lies a problem with using exclusively male imagery for God - by narrowing down the words we prefer to use about God, we limit our view and experience of God. In short, our language causes a kind of spiritual, theological tunnel vision.



7. But there's more at risk when we isolate our expression of who God is down to one or a few preferred words and metaphors. The 2nd of the 10 great commands in the O.T. tells us that we should not create an idol that attempts to represent God as anything earthly (see Exodus 20.4). Thus, as Presbyterian theologian Shirley Guthrie says, because masculinity or maleness is by definition something earthly, we run the risk of idolatry when we narrow our God-talk down to male language exclusively.

8. A final "question behind the question" is simply this - how does our own particular history influence this? First, note that across church history leaders, writers, and heavyweight theologians did not hesitate to use feminine language about God: this started early right after the New Testament era, carried forward into the Dark and Middle Ages, and through into the Reformation itself (yes, even Martin Luther and John Calvin used feminine terminology for God). Even today, non-Western Christianity (in Latin America, and across Asia and Africa) often use both male and feminine imagery for God.

9. So what gives? Why does a large part of American Christianity get so animated about using only male language about God? Well, it has to do with seismic cultural changes that occurred 100-150 years ago. Here's how two church historians describe that: "As women sought political power through suffrage and moral authority through temperance, male Protestant leaders felt an acute sense of gender anxiety. They systematically sought to 're-masculinize' the faith...God was recast not as the gentle caregiver but as a virile, assertive, and explicitly male sovereign who demanded heroic, masculine obedience" (Gail Bederman) and "The late nineteenth century saw the birth of a deliberate effort to masculinize God and Christian devotion in response to women's growing cultural and political influence. To counter the suffrage movement, conservative Christians explicitly linked orthodoxy to male authority, depicting God in terms of unchecked power, dominion, and masculine headship" (Kristin Kobes-DuMez).

10. Some questions to consider after all of the above: 1) Is our God big enough or have we whittled God down to the size of our comprehension?; 2) Have we neglected the wide range of terms and images for God in scripture?; 3) How have we experienced and understood less of God because we've limited our language about God?; 4) How does our own background and culture color the way we understand scripture and God? To say that more bluntly, how have we distorted the God of scripture into a reflection of ourselves?; and 5) How can Jesus Christ, God's clearest self-expression, correct our misrepresentation of God?

A Prayer for the Week

Great and infinite God, You who are far larger than our finite words can hold yet are as intimately near as a nursing mother, forgive me for the ways I so easily shrink You down to the size of my own comprehension, biases, and cultural preferences. Open my heart to see and embrace more of the holy mystery of who You are as revealed through the vast tapestry of sacred scripture, the witness of church history, and most clearly in the compassion and courage of Jesus Christ. Free me from the idolatry of creating you in my own image, for a god of my own making is no god at all. May Your Spirit draw me into a deeper, richer encounter with You, and may that leave me speechless, amazed, transformed, and profoundly grateful, amen.

A Week to Expand Your Language about God

Spend the week expanding your vocabulary and mental models for who God is. From the list below, select a term or metaphor for God that you rarely use. Each day, center your prayer and reflection around this one image. Pray with your family using this one image as the centerpiece. Journal a little or reflect on how this image for God increases or refreshes your view of who God is and what God does:

- God as Father (in ancient culture, the one charged with protecting, providing for, and ensuring the welfare of a family)
- God's Spirit like a mother bird that hovers over and brings order out of the chaos (Genesis 1.2)
- God is like a mother bear that protects Her cubs ferociously (Hosea 13.8)
- God is like a woman giving birth to a whole new you (Numbers 11.12; Isaiah 42.14)
- God is like a nursing mother who holds you tenderly to Her chest (Isaiah 49.15)
- God is like a mother carrying us in a basket on Her back (a favorite image of God in African Christianity)
- God is our Rock, the sure ground under our feet, and our Fortress, the safe place we can go and be safe (Psalm 18.2)
- God is a running Spring when we are thirsty (Jeremiah 2.13)
- God is Light, showing us the way in the darkness (1st John 1.5)
- God is our Shade, our relief from the heat of life (Psalm 12.15)
- God is a Refiner's Fire, boiling the impurities and imperfections out of us (Malachi 3.2)

If you find this kind of spiritual exercise really meaningful, this short book might make a good traveling companion for you: [God Is - Kindle edition by Wyckoff, Mallory](#)

Explore More

Here are a few more resources on gendered language about God in scripture and beyond:

- [What are God's pronouns? How the church today is \(or isn't\) gendering God](#)
- [The Exclusive Use of Male Language for God: An Invisible Barrier to Women Pursuing Ministry Leadership](#)
- [The ongoing Reformation of language for God](#)
- [Does God Have Gender? Amy Peeler](#) (You can find a host of interviews with this scholar about this topic on YouTube, some short, some more long form)
- [Gender of God with Mallory Wyckoff & Amy Peeler](#)