

The Word is Near You: A Feminist Conversation with Lindbeck

By Amy Plantinga Pauw

"As Christian feminists provide critiques of male writers and readers of Scripture, they do so not from the secure vantage point of infallible experience, but as fellow pilgrims in the faith. Within the framework provided by Christian readings of Scripture, this entails the acknowledgment that those attacking the sin of the patriarchal tradition are themselves subject to error and sin."

chance remark by a French instructor during my junior year of study at the Sorbonne has stayed with me. My fellow foreigners and I were repeatedly using the indicative in a certain subjunctive clause. Our teacher corrected us, noting that at present our usage was not standard French. But that may change, she added with a wry smile, "grace a' vous, peut-etre" - "thanks to you, perhaps." Because languages are living systems, the grammatical rules governing them are subject to change, sometimes even thanks to the practices of outsiders.

That remark has stayed with me partly because of George Lindbeck's provocative book *The Nature of Doctrine*, where he advocates a cultural-linguistic model of religion focusing upon the shared language and practices of a religious community as the primary ground of religious experience. Lindbeck's suggestion that religious systems are like languages and their doctrines like grammatical rules for correct speech has received enormous and diverse response within theological circles. However, its implications for Christian feminism have received little attention.¹ This is unfortunate, in my view, because Lindbeck's "cultural-linguistic" approach offers largely untapped resources for reformist feminism.²

In this essay, I will offer some preliminary reflections on the implications of Lindbeck's general approach for the use of Scripture in the Christian community as it pertains to women. Though in some sense they have been "insiders" to the faith from the beginning, women have been consistently marginalized within the Christian community, both overtly and subtly. In responding to this basic feminist insight, I will be exploring the dynamics of grammatical change and how the practices of women within the Christian community may require changes in the language of faith. My guide for this exploration is

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¹ Lindbeck and his students have observed, for example, a conspicuous silence on feminist language issues. In this respect, as in others, Lindbeck is to be distinguished from other confessional Lutherans with an admiration for Karl Barth.

² It will become clear that Lindbeck's approach is not helpful to revolutionary or separatist feminists, but only to those committed to reforming the Christian tradition within which they stand.

the apostle Paul—one who entered the Christian community as a notorious outsider and went on to become a very controversial insider. My hope is that Paul's bold use of Scripture in proclaiming the inclusion of the Gentiles in God's promises will serve as a model for those committed to the full inclusion of women in those same promises.

I

The cultural-linguistic approach Lindbeck advocates may seem an unlikely vehicle for feminist concerns. Lindbeck's critics, as well as some of his supporters, have claimed to discern an intrinsic conservatism in this approach, "a kind of built-in advocacy of conformity to established collective practices."³ A narrow reading of Lindbeck might lead to treating the canonical texts as a given, ignoring both the historical and social conditions of their creation and the way in which the resultant texts are fused with the successive worlds in which they function. On this reading, the experience of women is to be conformed to the peculiar topography of the scriptural texts as well as to the traditions that function as extensions of the Christian canon. Women are not encouraged to reflect on ways in which these texts and traditions have been used oppressively against them. The primary function of the language of faith is to absorb their experience, not to reflect or accommodate it.

In developing a cultural-linguistic approach that resists these reactionary conclusions, I have been guided by some of the biblical scholars who have demonstrated sympathies for Lindbeck's model.⁴ The attractiveness of their approach for reformist feminism is twofold: First, they acknowledge the importance of historical-critical questions for developing a "thick description"⁵ of the contexts in which biblical texts were written. Second, they appreciate the rich interplay between text and community. Biblical scholars who adopt a cultural-linguistic approach tend to construe it more broadly, recognizing that the biblical narrative never functions in isolation, but as part of a larger "communicating structure."⁶

It is my perception that the most constructive critiques of the church's language and practices by reformist feminists have been along broadly cultural-linguistic lines. Such critiques characteristically start out with remarks about the historically and culturally conditioned character of the Christian liturgical and theological traditions, specifically the multifarious ways in which those traditions reflect a patriarchal context. They go on to note how certain linguistic practices embedded in those traditions have had deleterious

³ The phrase is from Kathryn Tanner's essay, "Theology and the Plain Sense," in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, edited by Garrett Green (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 60. My article is a kind of elaborate footnote to her contention that an ecclesiocentric approach to Scripture can form "a tradition that is self-critical, pluralistic, and viable across a wide range of geographical differences and historical changes of circumstance."

⁴ In this essay, I will be drawing on the work of Wayne A. Meeks, Gerd Theissen, Richard B. Hays, and Mary Rose D'Angelo.

⁵ See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 3-30.

effects on women in the church. Marjorie Proctor-Smith's summarization of the feminist charge is typical in this regard: "Exclusively or dominantly male language about God grants authority to men in a patriarchal culture and religion."⁷

It is instructive to note three dominant cultural-linguistic presuppositions operative here. First, linguistic practices are not a peripheral matter for Christian faith. This is why so much of the feminist critique has focused on the textual traditions and liturgical practices of Christian communities. Words have the power to shape communal forms of life, for ill as well as for good. In particular, the nearly exclusive use of male language for God has often had the effect of marginalizing women in the Christian community and in society.⁸

The second broadly cultural-linguistic presupposition is related to the first. Language for God does not "mean" all by itself, but only as it is used in specific (in this case, patriarchal) religious and cultural contexts. To understand how religious language functions, one must produce a "thick description" of the cultural context—the web of interconnected signs, relationships, and actions within which specific terms are deployed. To discover the original web of meaning in which the texts were created and functioned, historical-critical investigation is important. Is *Abba* language points to the unique intimacy of Jesus with God and is without parallel in the Judaism of his day? Or must we see this language in a political context, functioning as a subversive Jewish alternative to imperial *patria otestas*?⁹ In the same way, to discover how religious language functions in our context, a "thick description" of our current ecclesiastical situation is required.

More precisely, we will need "thick descriptions" of a variety of contemporary church contexts, since we cannot assume that scriptural language in our day has a stable, identifiable meaning across cultural, economic, and denominational boundaries.

The third operative presupposition is that a key to judging the faithfulness or viability of a religious tradition, including its linguistic practices, is in terms of its "social embodiment,"¹⁰ the forms of life that correspond to the symbolic universe created and sustained by those practices.¹¹ Here, Christian feminists pronounce a negative judgment. They have seen the communal forms of life that correspond to a symbolic world bounded

⁶ Wayne Meeks contends that "the communicating structure" of a religion comprises not only the textual narrative but also "ethos, world-view and sacred symbols." See "A Hermeneutics of Social Embodiment," *Harvard Theological Review* 79:1-3 (1986), pp. 176-186.

⁷ Marjorie Proctor-Smith, *In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), p. 85.

⁸ It should be noted that the converse does not necessarily apply. Using feminine language for God will not, in itself, foster the full inclusion of women in the church. This conclusion, hastily drawn in all too many feminist language discussions, fails to reckon with the complexities of the ways words function in communal contexts.

⁹ Mary Rose D'Angelo, a Yale-trained scholar, argues this position in "*Abba* and 'Father': Imperial Theology and the Jesus Traditions," *Journal of Biblical Literature*. 111 (December, 1992), pp. 611-630.

by exclusively or dominantly male language for God, forms that fall far short of the eschatological promises of the gospel.

II

The value of a cultural-linguistic model for reformist feminists becomes even more apparent in light of the serious difficulties that have plagued their departures from it. Rather than judging communal forms of life by norms internal to the community's symbolic world—namely God's eschatological promises—many contemporary feminists have made appeals instead to women's inner subjectivity or to a kind of pre-linguistic, pre-cultural experience. In either case, the effect is to claim a kind of direct awareness that is unmediated by concepts provided by particular linguistic and cultural communities, and hence, to use Schleiermacher's famous phrase, "raised above all error." For example, in her examination of the writings of Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Sheila Greeve Devaney finds a tension between their acknowledgment on the one hand of the historical situatedness of all human knowledge, and, on the other, their appeals to women's experience as a kind of Archimedean point from which to judge the Christian faith.¹²

Retaining a broadly cultural-linguistic approach would help resolve some of the tensions in feminist appeals to women's experience. It would not rule out such appeals. Rather, it would encourage reflection on the experience of women as it has been shaped by the liturgical and social practices of the Christian community. A cultural-linguistic approach would encourage judging such experience, not on nonlinguistic and individual grounds, but according to textual and communal norms. As Christian feminists provide critiques of male writers and readers of Scripture, they do so not from the secure vantage point of infallible experience, but as fellow pilgrims in the faith. Within the framework provided by Christian readings of Scripture, this entails the acknowledgment that those attacking the sin of the patriarchal tradition are themselves subject to error and sin.

I do not mean to imply, however, that this critique takes place within some hermetically sealed world created by the textual and communal norms of the Christian community. One of the genuine contributions of feminists to the Christian pilgrimage has been the recognition that we participate in many overlapping communities of discourse. If religious communities are defined by certain linguistic practices, so, for example, are philosophical and political communities. A member of a religious community is typically a member of these other communities simultaneously. Acknowledging this may perhaps

¹⁰ The phrase is taken from Wayne A. Meeks, "A Hermeneutics of Social Embodiment," p. 176.

¹¹ Stanley Hauerwas' appropriation of Lindbeck's approach would seem to make social embodiment the only key to judging the truthfulness of Christian traditions. I find Lindbeck himself to be more nuanced on this issue.

¹² "Problems with Feminist Theory: Historicity and the Search for Sure Foundations," *Embodied Love: Sensuality and Relationship As Feminist Values*, edited by Paula M. Coe, et al. (New York: Harper, 1987), pp. 79-95.

quell the unfortunate tendency of some to cry "Feuerbach" every time the question of reciprocal influence between our social structures and the language of faith comes up. The history of Christianity is not the story of the transmission of an unchanging language to successive communities. It is instead the story of successive fusions of the linguistic world of Christian texts and traditions with other linguistic worlds.

This means that our Christian articulations of the world rendered by the scriptural narratives are ineluctably influenced by the other communities of discourse to which we belong. Even ways of referring to God-names for God-are tied not only to our fluency as Christians, but also to our entire linguistic repertoire. We can see this clearly in the example of Anselm, who was more candid on this point than many of his Barthian admirers, regarding male language for God. When confronted with the question of whether "father and son" or "mother and daughter" are preferable names for God, Anselm's first inclination was to defend traditional trinitarian grammar in terms of the language of zoology: It is "characteristic of the better sex to be father or son and of the inferior sex to be mother or daughter."¹³ Anselm hesitated, not because this was an inappropriate projection of creaturely distinctions onto the divine reality, but because it was zoologically imprecise: "In some species of birds the female sex is always larger and stronger, the male sex smaller and weaker." Surely any name for the trinitarian God must reflect what is superior in creaturely reality. Anselm finally defended his conclusion that "the Supreme Spirit is more suitably called father than mother" in terms of Aristotelian biology: "The first and principal cause of offspring is always in the father." And because "a son is always more like a father than is a daughter," the Word is "most truly a son."

Anselm's defense of the church's linguistic practices borrowed from his fluency in the scientific discourse of his day. Most present defenders of this language instead draw upon other linguistic repertoires, advancing literary analyses of the unique status of Father language in Scripture, historical-critical appeals to its emancipatory potential, or simply a revelational positivism that provides just as much of an independent linguistic framework as other approaches. What they share with Anselm is a defense of the grammar of faith by appeals to other discursive modes that they assume their hearers will find valid.

III

The apostle Paul—a Jew, a Roman citizen, and an apostle to the Gentiles—was also a member of different communities of discourse. It is time to return to him, and examine how he fused his fluency in the language of Scripture with the communal dynamics of the inclusion of the Gentiles. In a recent book,¹⁴ Richard B. Hays, a scholar much influenced by Lindbeck's approach, listens carefully for echoes of Scripture in Paul's letters to young Christian churches. One of his central insights is that Paul's hermeneutic was ecclesiocentric, rather than christocentric or individualistic.¹⁵

¹³ See *Monologion*, ch. 42. Quotations are from *Anselm of Canterbury*, edited and translated by Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1974), Volume 1, pp. 55-56.

According to Hays, Paul did not treat Israel's Scriptures as a reservoir of appropriate theological language. In contrast to the practices of Matthew and John, "We rarely find Paul using Scripture to define the identity of Jesus Christ or to reflect theologically about it."¹⁶ Nor did the apostle view Scripture as a complex codification of past religious experience echoing his own. Paul's writings reflect not so much the agonies and ecstasies of private religious experience as the challenges of a new ecclesial situation. Paul evoked Scripture in surprising, even subversive, ways to argue for a new vision of the church, one in which Gentiles were included in God's promises to Israel.

The grafting of the Gentiles into the rich root of Israel required Paul to execute bold rereadings of familiar texts. For example, Paul subverts the story of Hagar and Sarah and their sons in Galatians 4:21-31 by interpreting it to mean that the uncircumcised are children of promise. The shock value of this use of Israel's story has often been lost on later Gentile readers. Commenting on this passage, Hays writes:

[Paul's] claim that Torah, rightly read, warrants the *rejection* of lawkeeping is, on its face, outrageous. No sane reader could appeal, without some flicker of irony, to the Law in order to nullify circumcision as the definitive sign of covenant relation with God.¹⁷

What grounds Paul's outrageous reading is the community's corporate experience of the Spirit. The Christians in Galatia have seen for themselves that God's covenant blessings do not depend on circumcision. This communal Spirit-experience has for Paul a hermeneutical function, leading him to "charismatic" rereadings of Scripture, "whose persuasive power will rest precariously on his ability to demonstrate a congruence between the scriptural text and the community summoned and shaped by his proclamation."¹⁸ In the interplay of text and community, the language of faith is transformed.

In an intriguing final chapter, Hays ponders the relevance of Paul's use of Scripture for the present people of God. Are we, whose religious experience has been so shaped by Paul's own writings, to follow his example in our use of Scripture? May we (or must we) enter the world of the biblical text with him and create our own echoes, extending the text's meaning in new directions, perhaps ones unforeseen by either Paul or its authors? Are we also "to opt for the hermeneutical priority of Spirit-experience"?¹⁹ For those of us coming from later Christian traditions in which enthusiasm of any sort has been regarded as suspect, even the question sounds alarming. Yet, Hays is convinced that the answer is

¹⁴ Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

¹⁵ Hays's argument for the ecclesiocentric nature of Paul's hermeneutics explicitly parallels Lindbeck's advocacy of a cultural-linguistic approach to doctrine, over against propositionalist and experiential-expressivist alternatives.

¹⁶ Hays, p. 86.

¹⁷ Hays, p. 112.

yes. Present-day followers of Jesus Christ must risk fresh readings of Scripture to find ways of proclaiming the presence of God in our midst.

Hays suggests three constraints to keep this spiritual freedom from becoming hermeneutical chaos. First, every reading of Scripture must uphold God's faithfulness to the covenant promises, preserving "a relation of continuity" with Israel's story. Second, every reading of Scripture must witness to the central significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Third, and the most difficult to discern and implement, every interpretation of Scripture must "shape the readers into a community that embodies the love of God as shown forth in Christ."²⁰ These constraints, though substantial, still give great rein to the discerning ear and the active imagination of the faithful.

Using Paul as a model for scriptural interpretation encourages a focus on the texts and practices of the church, rather than on apologetic strategies or spiritual self-examination. But this linguistic focus should not be construed in a narrowly intertextual fashion, one that attempts to bracket all questions of referent and religious experience. Though this has sometimes been a temptation of the cultural-linguistic approach, it is one women are less likely to fall prey to on account of their marginalization within Christian texts and traditions. In acknowledging the active presence of God in their midst as the basis for their reforming efforts, Christian feminists have been faithful to Paul's example. His immersion in the world of the Bible was a conduit, not a substitute, for his encounter with the living God. He recognized the God who is rendered in the scriptural narratives as the same God actively present in his own day.

Likewise, feminists should note how Paul's experiences of the work of God in the community's midst infiltrated the world of the text, changing its content as well as its audience. The traffic between the ecclesial context and the world of the text was for him always two-way. If, in Hays's words, "the identity of the church is found in the story," it was also true for Paul that "the meaning of the story is found in the church."²¹ Feminists have seen the dangers of relegating certain members of the community to the receiving end of interpretive activity, thus denying them full participation in the ongoing communal formation. Taking Paul's experience of the inclusion of the Gentiles as a model for an ecclesiocentric approach to women's experience, we will give priority to the Christian experience of women over established patterns of interpretation, while at the same recognizing that their experience is mediated by the same tradition they are transforming.

IV

Mary Ann Tolbert has rightly noted that feminist reinterpreters of Scripture find

¹⁸ Hays, p. 108.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Hays, p. 191.

themselves "in the position of having to dismantle the patterns themselves, and the only tools at hand are ironically the insights provided by those same patterns."²² Christian feminists seek to mold the church into a community that fully embodies God's love, and this requires dismantling the patterns of patriarchy so deeply embedded in the Christian tradition. But the tools at hand define the very contours of that love—namely the story of God with Israel and the event of Jesus Christ.

One of the primary aims in the work of Phyllis Trible and others has been to pry open some space for women by dismantling the patriarchal patterns in scriptural texts. Paul faced a similar challenge regarding the inclusion of the Gentiles. Like women in the Christian tradition as a whole, Gentiles were not well represented in Israel's Scriptures. Convinced nonetheless of their full inclusion in God's promises, Paul did not hesitate to pry open some space for them in the biblical texts, even when this required what must have appeared to be profound discontinuities with established interpretive traditions. The radical way in which he reads Gentiles into the story of Hagar in Galatians 4 has already been noted.

By contrast, I can find only one passage, of dubious textual authenticity, where Paul deliberately reads women into a scriptural text. This occurs in his discouragement of unions between believers and unbelievers at the end of 2 Corinthians 6. He appeals to 2 Samuel 7:14, which reads, "I shall be a father to him, and he will be a son to me."²³ With the Corinthian social situation in mind, Paul includes women in his rendering of the verse: "I shall be your father, and you will be my sons and daughters." Unfortunately, this example is a rare exception in the Pauline corpus. The paucity of Paul's use of the words *daughter* and *sister* is striking, given his generous use of son and brother. Apart from his commendations of individual women in Romans 16 and Philemon, the terms appear only in discussions of marriage.

But Christian feminists, taking their cue from Paul's daring inclusion of the Gentiles in Israel's Scriptures, need to be bolder than Paul himself on this point. They cannot assume that Paul completed the job of prying open the text for women, and so must read women into texts deliberately, including Paul's own letters. Feminists ought to challenge, for example, the way Paul's first letter to the Corinthians reads women out at a crucial juncture. In his summary of the faith to a Corinthian congregation embroiled in disputes about female leadership in worship, Paul justifies his pastoral authority by tracing a line of "apostolic succession" from the first witnesses of the resurrection to the last, namely himself. Significantly, the tradition he passes down omits the fact that women, not Peter, were the first witnesses to the resurrection. A feminist reading of 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 must deliberately include women, perhaps with the result of subverting the notorious

²¹ Hays, p. 117.

²² Mary Ann Tolbert "Defining the Problem: The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics" *Semeia* 28 (1983), p. 112.

²³ My translation of the Septuagint.

effects of Paul's reflections on women in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14. Christian feminists who follow Paul will not settle for merely bowdlerizing the text as the New Revised Standard Version often does, adding "daughters" to the many sons of Israel, or "sisters" to the brothers of Paul's exhortations. While the intent of the new translation is laudable, it can have the effect of merely covering up the patriarchal patterns in Scripture, not dismantling them.

Up to this point, the suggestions for a feminist reinterpretation of Scripture inspired by Paul's example have been focused not on God, but on the people of God. This seems only appropriate. Paul's letters, after all, were primarily pastoral, not apologetic or liturgical. The chief aim of his hermeneutic was to articulate a new vision of the people of God, not to make claims for the name of God or the identity of Jesus Christ. Likewise, if we follow Paul in making the social embodiment of the faith our hermeneutical focus, the issue of appropriate language for God will function not as a starting point, but as a concluding unscientific postscript.

A postscript is not a dead end. While articulating a new vision of the people of God takes precedence for Paul over theological and liturgical reflection, the two are not finally separable. Paul's Christology is both foundational to his ecclesiology and profoundly shaped by it. Another example from 1 Corinthians is instructive here. His witness of the ecclesial outworkings of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ required him literally to expand his conception of the identity of God. The Shema of Israel proclaimed that "the Lord our God, the Lord is one." In Paul's own denunciation of idolatry, echoes of the Shema find a distinctive new resonance: "For us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live" (1 Cor. 8: 6). Witness to God's inclusion of the

once marginalized Gentiles requires the confession of one God *and* one Lord. Paul's example demonstrates that a focus on the church's life and practices does not preclude the possibility of genuine, even radical change in its ways of confessing God. If Paul is to be a guide in interpreting the language of Scripture for a church in which women too are seeing visions and dreaming dreams, the church's confession of God may well echo in other ways than before.

Following Paul will involve taking a rather large detour around the roads travelled by the present participants in the debate about appropriate Christian language for God. But that might not be a bad idea. On polar ends of the bitter debate currently raging in the churches are doctrinalists on the one hand, who insist that "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" is God's proper name, hence fixed and immutable, and experiential-expressivists on the other, who view the Christian conception of God as a mirror of human aspirations, to be constructed and reconstructed according to our needs and current wisdom. A middle path between these views is sorely needed and may be best charted by Paul's ecclesiocentric indirection.

Systematic elaboration of this thesis would require another essay. Instead, I will bring some unsystematic closure to the present one by means of a concluding postscript drawn out of an event in the life of my own congregation. In its focus on the social embodiment of the faith in a particular Christian community, I trust that its indebtedness both to the patterns of Paul's use of Scripture and to Lindbeck's culturallinguistic model of doctrine will be evident.

Five teenagers joined our church this past spring, all of them female. Their confession of faith in Jesus Christ was an act of resistance against the cultural forces surrounding them. None of them had a single friend outside the congregation who was joining a faith community. They were venturing this move in defiance of general social expectations, as a testimony to the continuing faithfulness of God.

As our church welcomed these young women and commissioned them to service, I began what turned out to be some extended reflections on Paul's use of sonship as a metaphor of communal initiation.²⁴ Paul uses the metaphor of sonship (*huiiothesia*) twice in this context, once in Romans 8:14-18 and once in Galatians 4:4-7. Translating it as "adoption as children," as the New Revised Standard Version does, obscures the logic of Paul's argument. Under Roman law, adopted female children were not full heirs, unless they were somehow elevated to the status of sons. While there is no reason to suppose that Paul excluded females deliberately, the logic of his argument in Romans 8 holds only in the case of males. Only adopted sons could be considered co-heirs with God's Son. Similarly, in the Galatians passage, Paul declares that those baptized into Christ, are no longer under tutelage. This means they must be adult sons, because, under the Roman law, women, along with slaves and children, were subject to tutelage and were not full heirs.²⁵ Only their adoption as sons would elevate them to this privileged status. To convey Paul's meaning, the metaphor must retain the literal force of *sonship*.

How then is my church to articulate the promises of the gospel to young North American Presbyterian women on the eve of the twenty-first century? How is it to render a contemporary account of God's active presence that is adequate to the grace shown in Scripture, in Jesus Christ, and in the continuing work of the Spirit in the church? Are we to testify to their new freedom in Jesus Christ by assuring these young women that the Father has elevated them to the status of sons, heirs along with his Son? Surely that is to keep them "enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world." Are we to witness to the grace of the Holy Spirit by proclaiming that they have received from the Father a Spirit of sonship? Surely that is to consign them once more to a "spirit of slavery." Letting the metaphor of sonship serve as a guide for the social embodiment of the Christian faith in a time when God is fulfilling the prophecy of Joel 2 in new and striking ways seems drastically inadequate.

²⁴ In articulating these reflections, I do not mean to imply any criticism of my pastors, whose pastoral sensitivity on these matters is exemplary.

By Paul's method of ecclesiocentric indirection, however, the inadequacy of sonship language leads back around to questions about the adequacy of traditional male language for God. For us as well as for Paul, ecclesiology and theology cannot finally be separated. It is no coincidence that the two places in Paul's writings where he develops the metaphor of sonship to characterize initiation into the Christian community are also the two places where Paul uses the term *Abba*. Only those who have been adopted as sons, full heirs along with God's Son, can cry, "Abba, Father!" The reason Father and Son language would have seemed so inappropriate to this occasion in my church was because sonship language was so inappropriate. Galatians 4 and Romans 8 seem to beg the question of appropriate Christian language for God, precisely because of their unsuitability for a contemporary social embodiment of God's promises.

How then are we to proclaim the One in whom every one of God's promises is a "Yes"? How are we to confess the One through whom we say "Amen" to the glory of God? Thanks to the testimony of those young women, my congregation, like the first-century Pauline communities, faces the challenges of a new ecclesial situation. The new vision of the church taking shape in our midst has already begun to remold our theological vision as well. Our new echoes of Scripture may sound jarring against the familiar chords of our religious tradition. Paul's certainly did. But a faithful Christian community sometimes needs to sing its praises with a new song.

²⁵ Mary Rose D'Angelo notes this in "*Abba* and 'Father': Imperial Theology and the Jesus Traditions."