

2015

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Recommended Citation

Pitman, Ruth M. (2015) "Another Look at the Feminist Language," *Quaker Religious Thought*: Vol. 125 , Article 9.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol125/iss1/9>

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ANOTHER LOOK AT THE FEMINIST LANGUAGE

RUTH M. PITMAN

The feminists' language has become so politically correct and is required in so many places that we have almost forgotten how it came to be and what it implies. But just for review: It consisted originally of making sure that women were not omitted from the discourse. This is accomplished by using "he/she" or varying one's examples by alternating female examples with male; banning the use of such terms as mailman (because women might do the same job); replacing "man" in such phrases as "God and man" with "humanity" or "humankind"; prohibiting the use of masculine pronouns with reference to God, instead repeating the word "God" or "God's"; and finally, by using "Ms." instead of Miss or Mrs. Since the 1970's, there have been some additions, most notably the "partner" language.

Sometimes the he/she language is called "inclusive." A more correct designation, though, would be "sex-specific," because it limits the pronouns to one sex or the other and limits "man" to male beings only. Being sex-specific is what might be expected of an overly sexed age. But to be honest, it is truly important to us. Men and women are different, and like dogs, we do want to know what we are dealing with. Another consequence of the feminist language is that it makes clear that God is beyond gender. Some feminists could not worship a god who had any hint of being male, so while humans are super-sexed, God must be carefully de-sexed. One pastor, who was otherwise content to use the feminists' language, had reservations about this aspect of it, because, as he told me, it deprived God of personhood. Since, as we know, God is a spirit, is sexlessness such a bad thing? Can you talk or pray to a spirit? Can you be intimate with a feeling? Or is "spirit" more than "feeling"? Such questions lead quickly to theology that is beyond me, and I suspect that they also lead to some sort of god other than the one of the Hebrew/Christian tradition, possibly something one might encounter in some sect.

Ms. is seldom an issue for Friends, because it runs counter to their principle of not using any honorifics, although when Friends write to those who would not understand the Quaker opposition to flattery

they are usually willing to be polite in the politically correct way. The popularity of Ms. has two roots. First, feminists thought it unfair that women should be designated as single or married, when men were not so designated, so Ms. became the counterpart of Mr., a sex tag, promptly adopted by business, eager to sell sex appropriate wares and give the illusion of politeness, but freed from the need to find out what title the lady preferred, which would be the genuinely polite thing to do. Second, Ms. represented the feminist opposition to marriage. It was feminist dogma that marriage has oppressed women and kept them from being able to prove themselves in fields other than the three German K's. As time moved on, the downgrading of marriage by unilateral, no-fault divorce and cohabitation was encouraged by the use of the word "partner," which obscured marital status and replaced husband, wife, and live-in. The media leapt to the cause, banning such words as "divorcee," "widow," and "unwed mother" and substituting "single parent." It avoided any hint of judgment, responsibility, or disadvantage. The word "adultery" is no longer used either; it is seen as an ancient pejorative. In the tolerant world, being "judgmental" is a very grave sin, deserving some sort of public, social disapproval.

But marriage did not go away; it only changed its meaning. One feminist, who, in the roaring 70's rejected marriage "because of what it has done to women" eventually came seeking a Quaker wedding as "a personal expression of our love" celebrated in a Friends' meeting where she felt "comfortable." (The above feminist hoped that marriage would give their two income household a tax break as well.) The new language has its origin in the cry for equality, power and rights, things that feminists have seen as previously being in the sole possession of males.

With this view pressed so hard and with language study (both English and foreign) in decline, the inclusive use of "man" and the inclusive use of the grammatically masculine pronouns were forgotten. Rob Tucker, whom long-time readers of QRT will remember, came from a linguistically sophisticated family. He understood the inclusivity of "man" and "he." In his youth, he thought it unfair that women got a set of pronouns all of their own, while he had to share his with them. When not being loudly insistent, feminists whimpered, "I feel left out. You men do me wrong; you hurt my feelings." Now hurting someone's feelings, in a secular world that rejects a biblical system of morality, is another grave sin. And what does it cost to make a person feel good? We do want people to understand us and like us.

Therefore, men as well as women have made the feminist language politically correct in short order. There is no cheaper way to make people feel good, equal, and included than to accept a little language juggling, though we are subtly drawn into the new meaning of the words and the beliefs that advocated the new meanings.

But things are beginning to change. In its latest hymn book (2006), the Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church has restored the original words of their hymns. Perhaps more important was the address that Carol Meyers gave to the Society for Biblical Literature in Baltimore in 2013, when she was inaugurated as its new president. To the astonishment of her audience, this author of many feminist studies answered her title question, “Was Hebrew Society Patriarchal?” with a resounding “No.” Most important, however, is the plight of women themselves. Women, now able to obtain better jobs, in charge of their own money — “money equals power” — now able to throw their bad husbands out, are finding that their bad husbands are able to throw them out with no sense of guilt because the ex-wives can get jobs to support themselves and the children, with only a modest contribution from the man, who is then free to get another woman. She will work to support herself and help support his new children. She has to bring in money, because his income is reduced by the child support that he has to pay his previous wife. Moreover, if the wife has any traditional feeling of responsibility for the household or the care of the family she is saddled with not only her job, but with running the household and driving the children to their many sporting, educational, and social engagements. In short, women are as bad off as their “barefoot and pregnant” ancestresses, unless they give up the idea of children to settle for pursuing (professional) happiness in the here and now. And all this says nothing about the consequences for the children, whose biological parents are scattered and are on the scene only part of the time and without the other parent present, not to mention the complication that step-parents bring to the situation.

There are two points to be made here. The two groups that have “benefited” from the feminist movement have been women who want a career without children and immature males who can pursue their lusts at will without consequences. Free contraceptives and abortion-on-demand facilitate this. The other point is that this new ethic is entirely directed at the present, not at creating a good society for the future. The language of rights and equality is the language of our western political systems, not the language of biblical ethics.

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Two other detours before I return to this theme. First is to demolish the idea that alike means equal. A friend of mine used to tell a story about two cousins of hers in rural Georgia. These girls were raised by their grandmother, who was determined to show no partiality whatsoever. When one got a new dress, so did the other. All the jelly beans were counted exactly. Now one was academically gifted and the other was not. When they finished high school, the gifted one wanted to go on to become a teacher, but she was not permitted to do so, because her sister was not capable of the same thing and had no interest in it.

The other detour is that I put “benefited” in quotation marks just now, because I firmly believe that a world that is good for women is likewise good for men — not for the immature, adult male, but for the mature, responsible male, and I believe that this world is also the best for children. If Women’s Lib. had wanted to benefit women, it would have shown them how to chose wise, mature husbands and raise their sons and daughters to the same wisdom and maturity.

Now back to biblical ethics! The Decalogue, found most concisely in Deuteronomy 5 and Exodus 20 and commented upon repeatedly throughout the Scriptures, most notably in Matthew 5-7, is directed to Israel collectively, as a people; it is no bill of individual rights. It is a minimalist outline for a successful society. It is also a deal that shows who God is. “I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil: in that I command thee this day to love the Lord thy God, to walk in his ways and to keep his commandments, that thou mayest live and multiply; and the Lord thy God shall bless thee in the land whither thou goest to possess it, but if thine heart turn away, so that thou wilt not hear, but shalt be drawn away and worship other gods, and serve them: I denounce unto you this day that ye shall surely perish, and that ye shall not prolong your days upon the land, whither thou passest over Jordan to possess it.” (Deuteronomy 30:15-18) The implication is that if Israel does not keep the Covenant, the society will not prosper and Yahweh will not be its god; they will be worshipping some false god. This code of law is so basic to human life that a number of people besides the Jews discovered parts of its wisdom, so that the Commands sometimes get passed off as nothing special.

Let me make clear: I do not believe that women are inferior to men. I am happy to be a woman, even though I have not used the one capacity unique to women, the ability to conceive, carry and give

birth. This is something no man, however tender, has ever had and it makes women not only “equal” but, if anything, a bit superior. The only gift that men have that is in any way comparable, in that it comes close to uniqueness, is their physical strength, which is at the same time their greatest liability. It enables them to be extremely helpful but also enables them to get what they want without regard for what is good for everyone. All other assets and talents are spread between men and women. On average, some fall more often to men, others more often to women. Equal does not mean same, and same is not necessarily equal. Men and women are different, and this is for the welfare of society in the long run. As an example, let me press another controversial point. Those who study social statistics have now shown that children who grow up with both biological parents, content to live in a faithful complementary relationship, do better on average than children who grow up in other arrangements. This is the most important reason for the institution of marriage. In spite of the benefits marriage brings to the individual, marriage is not designed primarily to make him — you understand my inclusive use of that word — feel good or live longer or enjoy better health; it is an institution that is there to benefit the future, whether any individual couple has children or not.

Society has given privileges (not rights!) to married people in order to support the relationship for the good of the next and subsequent generations. And in our society married people have abused those privileges with impunity, reducing marriage to their personal good feeling. As to the much coveted financial benefits of marriage, one of which is the death benefit offered by Social Security to someone who loses his spouse, these are privileges of marriage intended to support marriage because it should be the best place for families. As a matter of need, a child who devotes his life to the welfare of one or both parents instead of marrying might actually need that money more than a genuine widow or widower.

To return to the subject of language and conclude: What we need and what the Church should be providing is a return to biblical inclusiveness, which understands that males are unthinkable without females and vice versa, that we are in this world together and that our joint job, even for us who do not marry, is to make it a good place for the future. This is what language should reflect and where our thinking needs to be. That is what is reflected in the collective use of “man” and of the grammatically masculine pronouns. We shall not be

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blessed by the Creator if we do not embrace Him and the morality that reflects who He is. (Deuteronomy 30:15-18. See also Deut. 4:39-40, 5:29, 7:6-13, etc.) Though such passages are especially common in Deuteronomy, similar passages from other biblical books as well contain the idea that God is known in His commandments and loved by the keeping of them, for the good of the society, e.g., “If ye love me, keep my commandments.” (John 14:15) and “I am come that they might have life and have it more abundantly.” (John 10:10)