

## Avoid "Linguistic Sexisms"

Should publications do everything possible to eliminate "linguistic sexism"—words and expressions that tend to make women feel disparaged? Yes, according to the editors of the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, published at Philadelphia's Temple University. In a statement appearing in the magazine and shared by mail with editors of other periodicals, the editors point to a number of "sexisms," then offer alternatives, and invite dialog and suggestions concerning five guidelines that they feel will help eliminate sexism from secular and religious language. Here are the guidelines, condensed and paraphrased:

1. Avoid the generic use of the word "man," both by itself and in compounds such as "mankind." Substitute words such as humanity, humankind, human beings, humans, persons.

2. Avoid use of masculine pronouns such as "he" or "his" to refer to men and women together. Substitute "he and she," "hers and his," or the as-yet-ungrammatical "their," as in "let everyone perform their worship."

3. Avoid referring to God with masculine pronouns. Avoid third-person pronouns in reference to God, or mix or alternate the feminine and masculine pronouns, thus referring to Her (Him).

4. Avoid using feminine pronouns to refer to entities such as the church or ancient Israel. Such usage normally reflects the assumption that the feminine is inferior to the masculine.

5. Avoid other male-dominant phrases when more than just males are meant. For example: "Sons of God," and "faith of our fathers."

We do not go along 100 percent with the suggestions offered by the editors of JES—and later we shall note two areas of difference—but we feel they have some merit. For example, to understand how strange the generic term "brethren" may sound to feminine ears, and how imprecise it is since it often is intended to include women, substitute the term "sisters" in the widely used post-Vatican II term "separated brethren." Most men would feel uncomfortable if they were to be included in the term "separated sisters." The editors of JES suggest that one way to test any expression suspected of being a linguistic sexism is to substitute a feminine word for the masculine and see how males would feel about being included in the resulting term.

One great service the JES guidelines render is to point up again how important it is for all who use words, whether privately, from the platform, or in writing, to be sensitive to connotations, overtones, and symbolic meanings that words have acquired as a result of contemporary movements within society. For instance, the civil-rights movement made us conscious of the fact that our language was filled with linguistic racism. True Christians realized, for example, that their children might acquire unfortunate attitudes from their finger-play-song "Satan makes my heart all black with sin." They saw that this song might suggest that black is intrinsically bad, that somehow it is connected with Satan, and that "whiteness" is better. So they changed the words of the song. And they made scores of other changes in their conversations and terminologies.

All Christians—if they are truly Christian, and hence love

others as themselves—must listen carefully all the time to what their peers and friends are saying, in order not to give unnecessary offense.

Currently the feminist movement has made all of us more conscious of language and practices that discriminate against women. Various expressions in our language seem to suggest that men are both dominant and superior, and that the male is the true human ideal.

We do not believe that good men—Christian men who sincerely want to reflect the spirit and wisdom of the Master—deliberately discriminate against women either by linguistic sexism or by acts of policy. We think they merely have a "blind spot" in this area, as they once did regarding racism. Whether a minority group (and we include women in this, even though numerically they may be in the majority in the world and in the church) is right or wrong in feeling that discrimination is intentional, may be debated. But it is beyond debate that those who use language and those who are in administrative positions must be aware of how minority groups *perceive* the situation. If minorities *feel* discriminated against, the "majority" should know this and take it into account. People must "listen." Too many "hear," but they do not "listen."

### Treat Bible With Integrity

Now, while we believe that women should be accorded equal dignity with men (since all human beings are equal under God), and we favor equality for women in job opportunities and pay, we do not favor the JES suggestion that we cease using masculine pronouns to refer to God, and feminine pronouns to refer to the church. To do this would destroy the impact of the strong imagery and symbolism of the Scriptures.

Jesus was born into this world as a man, not a woman. The prophet Isaiah declared, "Unto us a son is given" (Isa. 9:6). If we are to treat the Bible and the plan of salvation with integrity, we must use masculine pronouns to refer to Jesus. "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son" (John 3:16). And throughout His earthly ministry Jesus referred to God as His *Father*. When Philip requested, "Shew us the Father," Jesus replied, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:8, 9).

It is important for us to keep in step with the times. It is important for us to avoid giving unnecessary offense to any group. But let us not become so relevant that we become irrelevant. In our efforts to do justice to the feminist movement or any other contemporary movement, let us not do injustice to the Word of God. "Had God thought us in need of revelations other than those made through Christ and in His written word, He would have given them."—*Testimonies*, vol. 8, p. 266. True, "our knowledge of God is partial and imperfect" (*ibid.*, p. 267), but nothing would please Satan more than to have Christians become so obsessed with linguistic problems that they would hesitate to speak boldly about their faith. So let us proclaim the gospel with all the skill and vigor that we possess. Part of the good news is that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

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