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# BULLETIN

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truth is based upon the fundamentals; in fact, much of it is not.

Carnell chose Kierkegaard and Niebuhr partially because he felt their developments of love as an ethical norm were absolutely true to the biblical concept of *agape*. Yet in choosing them, his ethic went beyond the technical meaning of the word to the incorporation of existentialism into orthodoxy. Carnell did not deny the confessional aspect of orthodoxy, but rather affirmed it. However, he realized that an individual moral decision could not be replaced by an affirmation of the creed, but itself needed expression within orthodoxy. By introducing existentialism he attempted to create that expression, and to challenge evangelicals to become passionately involved in the work of loving others. It is by accepting that challenge, more relevant today than ever before, that we demonstrate that our lives have been touched by the grace of God.

#### Abbreviations

C.C.—*Christian Commitment: An Apologetic*

K.L.—*The Kingdom of Love and the Pride of Life*

P.C.R.—*A Philosophy of the Christian Religion*

T.R.N.—*The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*

C.O.T.—*The Case for Orthodox Theology*

"N.C.V."—"Niebuhr's Criteria of Verification," *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought*

B.S.K.—*The Burden of Soren Kierkegaard*

"A.C.S.E."—"A Christian Social Ethics," *The Christian Century*

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## Donald Bloesch on the Trinity: Right Battle, Wrong Battle Lines

by Thomas Finger

Donald Bloesch's latest book, *The Battle for the Trinity: The Debate over Inclusive God-Language* (Servant, 1985), warns its readers that a battle over God's transcendence is now being fought in the Church.

Is God the radically Other, a trinitarian fellowship of love distinct from the world, or is God simply the deepest force, energizing nature and history? Does salvation consist of this radically Other One coming to us in self-sacrificing love, despite our resistance, or does salvation involve nothing more than the actualization of our latent potentialities?

Bloesch feels that many forms of feminist theology show panentheistic tendencies that threaten the church. Feminine imagery for God can express them with especial force. Consequently, Bloesch feels today's crucial battle is often fought in "the debate over inclusive God-language," to quote the subtitle of his book.

Nonetheless, the issues involved are subtle and complex. Bloesch does not wholly reject feminine God-imagery, but to some extent acknowledges its importance and appropriateness. Moreover, the battle ranges over a very broad territory. Bloesch acknowledges that "feminist theology is just the tip of the iceberg."<sup>1</sup> I affirm Bloesch's basic concern. In a day when rising widespread and destructive tensions threaten humanity's existence, the Church and the world deeply need the affirmation that a Love and a Strength far greater than human resources still governs all things. Because evangelicals are now taking sociological and psychological tensions seriously, we need to guard against reducing all problems to humanistic

dimensions, and we need to remember that human reality is best understood and healed in light of that which radically transcends it.

I also agree that "feminists" have raised, in acute form, issues central to the "battle" over God's relationship to humankind. But I cannot agree that Bloesch has always drawn his specific battle lines at the right places. In a book which emphasizes linguistic precision, his terminology often blurs. In a book which focuses on the Trinity, he misapprehends one crucial dimension of its significance.

#### Linguistic Imprecision

"Feminism." Bloesch often acknowledges that different forms of feminist theology exist. He appreciatively quotes some feminist thinkers. Nevertheless, not infrequently he employs the term *feminist* for all those on the opposite side of his battle line.

For instance, he claims that "feminists locate authority in the self" (p. 64); "the norms for feminism are therefore cultural rather than ecclesiastical, experiential rather than biblical" (p. 58). Even while seeking to counter the impression that his perspective is totally negative, Bloesch refers to "feminist theology" as "this new adversary to traditional Christian faith" (p. xvii).

More seriously, Bloesch draws numerous comparisons between "feminism" and "the German Christians" who, in the 1930s, eventually sided with Hitler. To his credit, he seeks to support his thesis by numerous parallels: as did the German Christians, "radical feminists" advocate the revival of pagan religious themes, an immanent instead of a transcendent deity,

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etc. Yet his comparison fails at a crucial point: whereas "German Christian" ideology justified a narrow, racist nationalism, feminism is, generally, the most racially and nationally inclusive of all the modern "isms."<sup>2</sup> While some feminist theologies may lend support to humanistic ideologies, it is unfair to link "feminism" with the programs and the death camps spawned by Nazi ideology.

To be sure, Bloesch qualifies the word *feminist* often enough to show that, for him, it is not wholly negative. Nonetheless, his indiscriminately unfavorable uses of the term might well alienate many who use it with pride. Like labels for other modern movements, "feminism" may legitimately denote a

priority to symbols. For instance: "Our conceptual language about God may be said to be further from the truth than our symbolic language, since the symbolic language is at one with the original language of the prophets and apostles" (p. 21). Accordingly, the symbol has "normative authority to which conceptual thinking is subordinate." In the same breath, however, Bloesch apparently grants the ultimate authority to "conceptual thinking," for it "enables us to determine which symbols are really germane to the faith and which are inauthentic or peripheral" (p. 17).

What kind of language tells us more directly what God is like? Symbols? Concepts? Or perhaps metaphors or analogies,

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*I suspect that many women, who wish to be "biblical" and "evangelical" and at the same time "feminist," feel themselves pushed away from the former labels when they are set in opposition to the latter.*

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wide variety of things. For many biblical Christians, "feminism" means a general emphasis on the value of women; and it functions as a symbol of self-identity.<sup>3</sup> Though these persons may deeply disagree on certain issues with others who call themselves feminists, it is difficult for them to hear "feminism" in general denounced without reacting personally.

I am a white male, and I read books which repeatedly use "white" and "male" negatively. Even if the author has formally defined such terms so that they need not include me, it often takes great effort to remind myself of that. Yet my sex has not played an insignificant or an unnoticed role throughout Church history, nor have I almost always heard God, humankind and even myself designated as pronouns for the opposite sex. Thus, I suspect that many women, who wish to be "biblical" and "evangelical" and at the same time "feminist," feel themselves pushed away from the former labels when they are set in opposition to the latter. For this reason, I wish that Bloesch had consistently used some precise term to indicate the viewpoint he is opposing. And I wish he had affirmed more loudly that all who are concerned about God's transcendence, including those who with pride call themselves "feminist," are on his side of the battle line.

*Theological Terminology.* If Bloesch were imprecise only in using the word *feminism*, he would commit no more than a strategic—though very important—mistake. But linguistic imprecision affects a central task of his book: that of providing guidelines for and a rational use of God-language in the Church.

The Bible uses different words and images to speak of God: God is called "Lord" and "Father," but also "Fortress" and "Rock." Some such terms indicate more directly what God is really like: most people would agree that God is more like a "father" than a "rock." But are there any guidelines for determining which terms refer more directly to God? If there were, the Church could discern whether feminine imagery is less, more, or equally appropriate for God as masculine imagery.

In his efforts to clarify God-language, Bloesch's language is often unclear. At the beginning of his chapter on this theme, he announces: "The crucial question concerning God-language is whether such language gives a *true knowledge* or *merely symbolic awareness* of the ultimate reality we call God" (p. 13, italics mine). In other important passages, Bloesch unfavorably compares symbols with concepts. For instance, "A symbol points beyond itself to a reality that can only be dimly perceived by the senses or faintly understood by reason. A symbol is a graphic image that brokenly reflects what it purports to describe."<sup>4</sup> But in other places, Bloesch ascribes a

words that Bloesch sometimes employs with similar ambiguity.<sup>5</sup> As in his use of "feminism," some consistency can be ferreted out of Bloesch's various uses of these terms. And no doubt his apparently discordant remarks reflect an effort to do justice to all sides of a complex problem. Yet, by using his key terms in imprecise ways, Bloesch opens himself not only to being misunderstood, but also to being misquoted and misrepresented with ease. A book written to stress the crucial importance of "God-language" needs to use language with extreme care.

*Imagery for God.* For Bloesch, masculine terminology more directly expresses what God is like than does feminine terminology. Yet sometimes his reasons for asserting this are not clear. For instance, Bloesch claims: "To switch from the masculine to the feminine in our descriptions of God in a service of worship is inevitably to present . . . a deity who is bisexual or androgynous rather than one who transcends the polarity of the sexes" (p. 54). But what preserves masculine terminology from the same flaw?

More specifically, Bloesch objects to Susan Thistlethwaite's suggestion that we speak of the Son as "begotten or born out of the Father's womb," for "this is patently metaphorical rather than literal language, and to press this metaphor is to sexualize the relationship between God and Christ."<sup>6</sup> Yet orthodox Christology has always spoken of the Son as "begotten" by the Father.<sup>7</sup> Why should "begotten" be any less open to "literal" misinterpretation than "womb"? In fact, might not just such a paradoxical combination of both terms underline the point that this relationship could not possibly be sexual?<sup>8</sup>

Bloesch insists that when applied to God, words like "Father" are "transformational images" which "drastically alter the ordinary cultural understanding of these terms. . . [I]n calling him Father the Bible challenges the human view of what a father should be" (p. 35). Precisely speaking, then, "when we call God Father we do not ascribe to him masculine attributes."<sup>9</sup> Yet Bloesch does not tell us why feminine terminology should not be capable of such transformations.

Nevertheless, despite such apparently groundless depreciations of feminine imagery, Bloesch wants "to be alive to the concern of women for wider acknowledgement of the feminine dimension of the sacred" (p. 53). While he insists that calling God Mother, at least as practiced by "radical feminists," "in effect transmutes God into a goddess" (pp. 44-45), he also says that God is "not only Father and Brother but also Mother and Sister" (p. 53). He acknowledges that Julian of Norwich and Nicholas Zinzendorf, respectively, spoke of Christ and the Spirit as "Mother" (p. 47). Bloesch presses for a limited

use of feminine imagery in worship and also in theology.<sup>10</sup> As in his use of feminism and terms like symbol, concept, analogy, and metaphor, Bloesch employs and evaluates feminine God-imagery in ways that sometimes seem inconsistent and unsupported. Once again, one may applaud him for considering many sides of these complex issues, yet he does so in ways which often blur his battle lines.

### The Trinitarian Foundation

Despite the ambiguities just mentioned, might Bloesch's preference for masculine God-language rest on an identifiable theological foundation? I think it does. As far as I can see, it is rooted in his understanding of God's historical saving work,

the primary initiator. The Spirit witnesses to the Son (Jn 16:13-15), who is presently subduing every rule and power and authority. But when the Son has accomplished this, he will deliver all things back to the Father (1 Cor 15:24-28). And then God will be all in all, and dwell in the midst of creation (Hab 2:14; Rev 21:2-4).

Viewed protologically, the Father is the initiator of the activity whose goal is the Spirit's dwelling amidst the Church; viewed eschatologically, the Spirit initiates the activity whose goal is the glorification of the Father. Regarded protologically, God appears primarily as transcendent, distinct from the world, and can best be symbolized as masculine. But regarded eschatologically, God will primarily be immanent, dwelling

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which flows from trinitarian foundations. Male imagery more directly indicates what God is like because God, "for the most part . . . chooses to relate himself to us as masculine" (p. 33). God "has addressed us only as his beloved, only as feminine co-respondent to his own masculinity."<sup>11</sup> Masculine imagery best expresses that God takes the initiative, and that God does the new and unexpected, which is so central to the biblical history of salvation. It expresses "the aggressive surprise of time as against the repetition of nature" which, in ancient times, would be expressed by feminine imagery of the primordial womb or matrix.<sup>12</sup> Largely for this reason, Bloesch insists that

Femininity is grounded in masculinity in the Bible (Eve came out of Adam) just as motherhood is grounded in fatherhood. The masculine is the ground of the feminine, but the feminine is the goal and glory of the masculine (1 Cor. 11:7). (pp. 34-35)

Properly understood, however, this last, seemingly passing acknowledgement—"the feminine is the goal and glory of the masculine"—calls for significant revision of Bloesch's trinitarian understanding.

Theology largely consists of reflecting on relationships among the various events and truths presented in Scripture. As Juergen Moltmann has shown, this reflection can be protological, tracing events back to their source; or eschatological, showing how they are ordered toward God's goal and glory.<sup>13</sup> Trinitarian theology has almost always been protological. Beginning from the Spirit, who is now active in the Church, theology has traced this activity back to the Son who sends the Spirit (Ac 2:33; Jn 15:26) and finally to the Father who sent the Son. Viewed from the perspective of its primal source and ground, the Father appears as "the origin of the Trinity" who sends the Son, while the Son sends the Spirit.<sup>14</sup> Viewed this way, God's saving activity appears primarily as something new and surprising, and as something initiated from the awesome otherness of the transcendent, sovereign God. I agree with Bloesch that, over against modern panentheistic tendencies, this transcendent initiation must be emphasized, and that masculine terminology very often expresses it well.

However, it is just as important for theology to reflect eschatologically; just as important to show where things are headed as to show where they have come from; and just as important to reflect on their goal and glory as on their source. Yet theological tradition has seldom emphasized the eschatological orientation of trinitarian activity. When one does so, one finds that the Spirit, rather than the Father, appears as

amidst creation, and the goal and glory of the divine work can best be symbolized as feminine.

In trinitarian theology, both modes of reflection are equally legitimate and important. When both are combined, the Father appears neither as more important nor more fully divine than does the Spirit or the Son, nor does the Spirit appear as more important or more truly Godlike than do the Son and Father. In fact, the uniqueness of the doctrine of the trinity consists not in affirming that God is transcendent; Judaism and Islam affirm this as well. Neither, of course, is the uniqueness found in affirming that God is immanent, which modern pantheisms also do. Rather, the uniqueness of the doctrine that Donald Bloesch so emphasizes consists in affirming this equality among the trinitarian persons and the importance of their activities.

This assertion takes on great significance when one realizes that approximately as many features of the Son's saving work can be well described in traditionally feminine terminology as can be in masculine terms. For Bloesch himself, "the essence of femininity in the biblical sense" consists of "fidelity, servanthood, meekness" (p. 38). And elsewhere, Bloesch affirms that Christ transformed patriarchal ideas of fatherhood and lordship when he "chose to realize his lordship in the role of a servant."<sup>15</sup> Although he does not adequately draw out the implications of such statements, they point to the fact that in the Son, God is revealed not only as initiating, commanding and judging, but also as responding, serving and faithfully suffering.<sup>16</sup>

The equality of the trinitarian persons becomes even more significant when one realizes that the Spirit's activity is best described in terms that are mostly "feminine." The Spirit bears, brings to birth, groans within us, nurtures, comforts, encompasses, caresses. Bloesch recognizes this, but he seeks to account for it by stressing that "the motherhood of God is mirrored in the Church." "If we are to follow the Biblical way," he writes, "we will designate God as our Father and the Church as our Mother. We refer to the motherhood of God indirectly when we call the church 'our Holy Mother'" (p. 38).

But for one whose theology is grounded in the trinity, this does not go far enough. Surely the Church is our mother only derivatively and indirectly, whereas God is our Mother originatively and directly. Without downgrading the role of the Church, any fully trinitarian theology must insist that the Church is a channel, a means, and an expression of the Motherhood of God. If one does not do so, one risks not only losing sight of the life-giving and nurturing characteristics of the divine, but also of deifying the Church.

## Conclusions

Biblical images and pronouns for God are mostly masculine. Theology and the Church must take this seriously. But theology's main task cannot be to count the occurrences of pronouns or images, but to inquire into the overall direction and significance of God's saving work. When it does, it finds that many symbols that were originally masculine become markedly qualified by characteristics which most people regard as feminine. The Lord becomes a servant. The judge is revealed as the compassionate one. When contrasted with the patriarchal cultures of biblical times, these transformations stand out as even more central to the Scriptures' deepest message.

However, theology usually has been more concerned with tracing things back toward their original sources than with following them forward toward their goal. It has been more concerned with rooting present reality in something firm, fixed and certain, than with being challenged by reality's openness to change, growth and the partially unknown. In the process, theology has usually failed to see that while masculine symbols are appropriate to God's initiating activity, the goal of God's work is the divine indwelling, which can best be symbolized in feminine terms. Protological and eschatological thinking should become equally important in theology. If they are, masculine and feminine imagery for God may come to be employed with similar frequency in the Church.

Besides reflecting on the deepest intention of the Bible's saving history, theology must also consider how pronouns and images function in non-biblical cultures. Bloesch is indeed correct that in Scripture, words like *Father* and *Son* operate in ways which "drastically alter the ordinary or cultural understanding" (p. 35). As I understand it, "Father-Son" language, when used for Jesus and the One who sent him, primarily expresses not sexuality, but faithfulness, love and intimacy. Quite early, however, ancient, then medieval, and then modern culture took back these symbols to support their own patriarchal structures. Because God is Father and Son, people said males are the rulers in society (the Spirit was often forgotten).

When culture has twisted or forgotten the meanings of biblical terminology, theology must often coin words to convey what Scripture initially intended. "Trinity" is a good example. It is not in the Bible. Yet Bloesch rightly insists that Christianity stands or falls with the fundamental truth it intends to signify.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, if culture and even the Church have distorted the intentionality behind the Bible's masculine God-symbols, theology and liturgy may need to stress others, or even develop new ones to redress the balance. In order to express what Scripture is truly saying, theology and liturgy may need to call God "She" even if the Bible does not. This need be no more damaging than discussing and praising the Holy Trinity.

What will happen if God is spoken of as feminine as often as he is spoken of as masculine? Will the fatal battle line between transcendence and pantheism be crossed, and the decisiveness of biblical salvation be submerged in a vague, vitalistic mysticism? Not necessarily. Not if theology can think both protologically and eschatologically. Not if Christians can both praise the transcendent Origin of all things and eagerly long for the indwelling which is its goal. Not if Christians can act in light of the stable, transcendent Source of all things and work toward their transformation.

If feminine God-language comes to be used within the Church in a balanced way, the Trinity can remain at the center of things, and its fundamental character may well become far better understood. The battle with pantheism need not be lost; but traditional Christianity may be able to incorporate

those truths which pantheism so one-sidedly and distortingly expresses. Added to the crucial insistence that God is other than and sovereign over this world will be the crucial awareness that God longs to dwell among us and to comfort and energize us with her presence. And in our crisis-torn world, an anxious and weary humanity needs to hear that.

<sup>1</sup> Donald Bloesch, *The Battle for the Trinity: the Debate over Inclusive God-Language* (Ann Arbor: Servant, 1985), p. 12. All page references in the article are to this volume.

<sup>2</sup> Though Bloesch recognizes the force of this objection (p. 78), he does not directly answer it. However, he does argue that "the new religious right in our country is closer to the political and social concerns of the . . . German Christians than the left-wing movements, including feminism" (p. 81). Nevertheless, parallels between "feminism" and "the German Christians" are the main focus of the relevant chapter.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, the following statement always appears prominently in the magazine *Daughters of Sarah*: "We are Christians; we are also feminists. Some say we cannot be both, but Christianity and feminism are inseparable."

<sup>4</sup> pp. 20-21; or, "A concept is an abstract term that roughly corresponds to what it purports to signify; a symbol is a pictorial term that brokenly reflects what it is intended to signify" (p. 17).

<sup>5</sup> Bloesch finds little value in metaphors, because they are "dissimilar to what is described, and while there may be a suggested likeness between the sign and what it signifies, there is no conceptual knowledge" (p. 14). In contrast, he favors analogical language, for it "presupposes an underlying similarity or congruity in the midst of real difference." Hence, "analogical knowledge is real knowledge, whereas metaphorical knowledge is only intuitive awareness or tacit knowledge" (p. 21). Yet Bloesch frequently intertwines these apparently well-defined terms in ways that are difficult to unravel. For instance: "concepts . . . partake of the analogical or symbolic"; "symbols may be either metaphors or analogies"; theologians may speak of God "in symbolic or imagistic terms, by way of analogy" (p. 21); or, God as the "Wholly Other" is "a conceptual metaphor in that it should be taken not literally but symbolically" (p. 29).

<sup>6</sup> The language proposed by Thistlethwaite was originally suggested at the Council of Toledo in the third century. See her "God-Language and the Trinity," *EKU-UCC Newsletter*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (February, 1984), p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> In view of the centrality of this term in classical Christology, including its appearance in the Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds, it hardly seems to be a "metaphor" in Bloesch's sense (note 5 above).

<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Bloesch objects to referring to the Holy Spirit as feminine, for "to posit an abiding feminine principle within a basically masculine Godhead is to bifurcate the trinity and to make God bisexual" (p. 47). But perhaps some such combination of terms could better express the truth that God is beyond sexuality than does this reference to the Godhead as "masculine."

<sup>9</sup> p. 36; a quotation from Robert Roth, "The Problem of How to Speak of God," *Interpretation*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (January 1984), p. 79.

<sup>10</sup> Bloesch has no trouble with a prayer such as the following proposed by Gail Ramshaw-Schmidt, so long as it is used in private devotions: "'O God, you are a nursing mother to all your faithful people. Nourish us with the milk of your word that we may live and grow in you, through your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.'" In public worship, however, feminine terminology may be used only when the masculine remains "the controlling symbol" (p. 53). Bloesch does not want prayers addressed to God primarily as feminine brought into public worship until broad church councils, including Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic representatives, approve of them (in practice, of course, this stipulation might well prohibit such changes forever).

<sup>11</sup> p. 33; this quotation is from Vernard Eller, *The Language of Canaan and the Grammar of Feminism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 46.

<sup>12</sup> p. 36; this quotation is again from Roth, p. 79.

<sup>13</sup> see Moltmann, *The Future of Creation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), pp. 80-96. Bloesch charges Moltmann with pantheism, teaching that "there is no supernatural Trinity but only the self-realization of divinity in world history" (Bloesch, p. 91; cf. pp. 6-7). Such an impression might be conveyed by phrases such as that God is not "a person projected in heaven" which Bloesch quotes from Moltmann's *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper, 1974, p. 247; quoted in Bloesch, p. 92). In his more recent book on the subject, however, Moltmann clearly indicates that "the divine relationship to the world is primarily determined by that inner relationship" of the trinitarian persons to each other (*The Trinity and the Kingdom* [San Francisco: Harper, 1981], p. 161).

<sup>14</sup> Scripture also speaks of the Father sending the Spirit (e.g., Jn 14:16, cf. 26). Traditionally, while western churches have spoken of the Spirit proceeding "from the Father and the Son," eastern ones have insisted that the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone.

<sup>15</sup> p. 40; Bloesch acknowledges that "Christ in his role of Wisdom who nurtures and guides the people of God can be thought of as feminine" (p. 40), and that this "feminine dimension of the Son is to be located in the Godhead itself" (p. 50). Yet Bloesch insists that "Christ in his role as Lord and Savior of the world . . . must always be envisaged as masculine" (p. 47). But if Christ redefined lordship through servanthood, and if his saving work involved compassion and humility, why should the distinction be drawn in this way?

<sup>16</sup> In this article, we use "feminine" or "masculine" to designate those characteristics which have been traditionally regarded as such. Fuller discussion of the issue, of course, would need to ask to what extent activities like "responding" or "commanding" ought to be called "feminine" or "masculine."

<sup>17</sup> Precisely speaking, intellectual comprehension and affirmation of this doctrine can hardly be indispensable to Christian faith. Many sound Christians have difficulty grasping its complexity, and may understandably even question its validity.

## TSF AND ESA JOINT-SEMINARS

TSF and Evangelicals for Social Action of which Dr. Grounds is president are planning seminars at theological and graduate schools across the country. These seminars will present the Biblical/theological bases for political involvement and address the difficulties in motivating Christians to become more aware and to participate more actively in community and national affairs. Effective working models will also be presented. For more information concerning these seminars, write to Dr. Grounds in care of the *Bulletin*.