Introduction:
God Language Re-forming Faith

Why do language and imagery of God matter? In a nutshell, they matter because they shape how we understand and experience God, how we think about faith, and how we understand ourselves and perceive others. In a word, they matter because of ministry. Language and imagery of God are means of ministry. In this volume, I hope you as readers will find truly Lutheran theological concerns: 1) that creation's source and dependence is none other than the Trinity; 2) that God's promise of grace in Christ is felt and understood in proclamations of the Gospel; and 3) that God works in and through us mortal creatures by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In a variety of ways each author here deepens and broadens Christian understanding and use of language as a means of proclamation. Collectively, this volume argues that faithful reformation continues through unsettling the familiar and learning to see, hear, speak, and know language of God anew. Specifically, this volume challenges the too-familiar, too-settled condition of Christian language and how it functions. It affects us.

Some of the articles press arguments in terms of gendered human language, while others provoke us out of our tendency to be anthropocentric with language. The term *inclusive language* has come to refer to language of God that is not only masculine or male-identified but also feminine or female-identified. Much of the literature on religious language over the last few decades refers to inclusive language. In this volume, it is used when authors are specifically referring to the need to disrupt androcentric language and to use human gender-inclusive language.

The term *expansive language* is a more recent development and refers to language of God that relies on the full range of creation, humans (of all genders and sexes), animals, plants, elements, etc. This term is also used here. A common Protestant phrase taken from the book of Psalms is a form of expansive language: "A mighty fortress is our God!" Expansive language also includes the theological claim of the Lord's Prayer that God is our Father. It includes the theological claim of St. Anselm of Canterbury taken from the Gospels, "But you, Jesus… Are you not that mother who, like a hen collects her chickens under her wing? Truly master, you are a mother."[1] God known as fortress, father, and mother—as well as rock, shepherd, and light—reminds us both of the otherness and intimacy of the Triune God.

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1. St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) from Prayer 10 to St. Paul, *Opera Omnia* 3:33 and 39–41.

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Just so with the scriptural variety of words and images of God! Here in this issue you will find variety. Together and individually, these articles reveal pain and desire; they lay out arguments; they articulate curiosity, anger, and welcome. Not all articles will speak to you as readers in the same way. For some, the weight will be in what is startling or challenging. For others, the weight will be in relief and assurance. My hope, as guest editor of this issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission,* is that you each find food for thought and something compelling with which to wrestle.

In "Language: Idolatry and Evangelism," **Mary Streufert** places the ongoing scholarship and dialogue on language within recent history of Lutherans in the United States. By turning to Scripture and Martin Luther's theology, she builds on the work of others to show that androcentric language of God is idolatrous. With clues from linguistic development theory, the author then advocates for expansive language. Again relying on Scripture and Luther, Streufert draws out the evangelical character of language, for language points to God's nature and helps us understand how God acts. In this opening article, you have a foretaste of the reformation available in the rest of this issue.

In "God as 'The King' and His Act of Reconciliation," **Surekha Nelavala** offers a complex reading of the parable of the vineyard and the laborers. As a dalit feminist Lutheran theologian, Nelavala exposes the deep pain that can result when images of God are translated into human conditions. Even while she takes apart biblical interpretation and images that cause harm, she stays with Scripture, certain that it is not hers to reject. Her reading concludes with new meaning, showing that all interpretation and application warrant care when we take access to power and privilege seriously.

In "Whose Gendered Language of God?" **Corrine Carvalho** argues that gender fluidity and inversion in the book of Jeremiah are resources to see that Scripture does not necessarily communicate gender binaries, either among humans or within God. Gender is surely complicated in the Hebrew Bible as she helps us to see. Carvalho furthers her argument to wonder not only about gendered images of God, but also to argue that God's grace is at work in contemporary understandings of gender fluidity. Her

biblical wrestling shows just how closely we employ human life to express the inexpressible, the divine.

In "Ongoing Reformation of Language and Spirituality," **Kirsi Stjerna** presents a stout challenge to the often divided positions on language. In a move that announces the law, Stjerna rejects charges of heresy against feminine or female-identified images of God; in a move that announces the gospel, she entreats readers to follow her to draw on the gifts of Finnish scholarship on Luther and feminist theology toward vibrant spirituality. Arguing that these moves are none other than *semper reformanda,* Stjerna locates the current urgencies over God language to the nerve of the Protestant Reformation.

In "Communicating Grace," **Terra Rowe** similarly relies on the new Finnish Luther scholarship, but here she relates their work to the work of feminist physicists and applies their collective ideas to models of justification, arguing for grace communicated rather than grace unilaterally given. With a sure hand in Luther's thinking, Rowe poses a challenge to Lutheran thought on grace to be freed from models of power over others in favor of Luther's writing on grace known in union, participation, and communion. Such a shift in the framework of justification affects the model of power inherent in all religious language, including language of God.

In her article, "Addressing God with Names of Earth," **Lisa Dahill** multiplies the scope of expansive language into new vistas, given the global environmental crisis. Following Dietrich Bonhoeffer, she points to sin as the condition of the union between God and the world in Christ broken apart. Surely, she argues, we are in a moral crisis with the Earth. At once invitation and experiment, Dahill relies on language and imagery in the natural world and extends this language and imagery of God to the Earth. She invites readers to imagine singing not only, "Jesus Christ the Apple Tree," but also "God the Earth."

In the *Currents Focus* article, "Preaching Emmanuel," **Andrew Tucker** encourages preachers to reclaim the value of preaching in the tumultuous cultural setting of the twenty-first century. Through engagement with the work of Martin Luther and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we discover that God in Christ becomes really present through the sermon. The sermon offers a vital relational component for the church as well as deep responsibility for preachers. The language of Emmanuel, particularly the fullness of meaning entailed in the "God with us," gives preachers a powerful promise to preach within our postmodern context.

Surely, by the character of these brief introductions, you know that this issue offers many creative ways to think and speak—critically and lovingly, longingly and confidently—of the "I AM WHO I AM" upon whom we shore. My hope is that the Christian community takes ever more seriously the faithful re-formation of language, imagery, and faith in which God is always at work.

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