

# LANGUAGE FOR MISSION

toward an Inclusive church

*Council on Faith and Life  
Pamphlet #4*



**Conference of Mennonites in Canada**

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## PREFACE

Inclusive language is a subject much discussed in our congregations. Some are for it. Some are against it. Some are not sure what the phrase means. In any case, the subject of inclusive language has become an issue for many. In some congregations inclusive language is acceptable. In others it is not. In some congregations there is divided opinion.

The Council on Faith and Life (CFL) of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada (CMC) has had the issue on its agenda for the past two years. In that time the CFL has brought the matter of inclusive language to discussions with church members and with college teachers at CMC annual sessions. Articles have been published in CMC church papers. A speech presented by Helmut Isaak on the subject at the Calgary '96 conference, as well as a series of talks by Isaak Block given at Altona Bergthaler Mennonite Church, is available from the CMC Resource Centre.

When the CFL heard that John J. Friesen, of Canadian Mennonite Bible College, was offering a 'Portable CMBC' course on the theme of inclusive language, the Council asked him to summarize his presentations. On the basis of the script received, the CFL prepared the text which you have in your hands. This pamphlet comes to you with the support of the Council on Faith and Life.

This pamphlet is not seen as the final word on inclusive language. We commend it to you as an inspiration for reflection and study. We are still in process on this issue. Besides, each congregation needs to find the best way to inspire genuine Christian fellowship among the body of believers, and to foster the true worship of God through Jesus Christ.

The pamphlet is offered with the prayer and hope that a consideration of the contents will increase our faith and our faithfulness to God. The concern of the pamphlet is that we should embrace the whole of the authoritative Biblical witness as a foundation for greater faithfulness in Christian mission.

Helmut Harder  
General Secretary

January 1997

# LANGUAGE FOR MISSION

## TOWARD AN INCLUSIVE CHURCH

### **What's the issue?**

Words are important. It is very difficult to communicate without the use of words. Words are especially important for Christians. To share the Gospel with others, as the Great Commission instructs us, we need to use words.

Language is the main tool the church uses to communicate the Gospel. This becomes obvious when the church seeks to do missionary work among people of another language and culture. The first job of missionaries is to learn the language of the people to whom they are called to witness. How will people understand the good news of Christ if they cannot understand what is being proclaimed?

It is not that the message has changed. 'Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever.' Rather, the vehicle delivering the message may have become outdated. Or the vehicle is simply not capable of carrying the meaning from one culture to another. Thus careful attention needs to be given to words and language.

Even in our own culture words sometimes change their meaning. At one time the word 'charity' meant love. Today it is an outdated word referring to the pennies we might offer to one who begs. At one time 'jealousy' referred strictly to vigilance in guarding a possession or in guarding against someone's unfaithfulness. Today it is most commonly used as a synonym of 'envy,' meaning to want what someone else possesses.

Gender-language has undergone significant changes in our society in recent years. In the past, the term 'man' included both males and females. For many people in today's society, that is no longer the

case. One might wish that the change had not happened, or one might try to ignore the change, but that does not alter the facts. So we need to take another look at the words we are using and what they are communicating. Otherwise we will encounter the same problem as a missionary who neglects to learn the language of the people on the mission field. The message will miscommunicate, or even not communicate at all. Christians need to communicate the message of Christ with clarity in every age.

## **Is this a modern issue?**

The problem goes back to the beginning of church history. When the Christian church began, its language and practice were more inclusive than those of many religions. In Judaism only men could form a synagogue; in Christianity both men and women could form a church. Some Roman religions included mainly men; Christianity included both men and women. Some religions included only free people; Christianity included both slaves and free. Some religions included only people from one ethnic group. Christianity was all-inclusive, embracing Jews, Greeks, and Romans.

This inclusiveness was evident among leaders as well. Slaves were leaders, and even bishops, of the church. Some women were drawn into leadership, something quite unheard of in other religions of the day.

Christianity arose in a setting in which the dominant cultures were patriarchal. Judaism was patriarchal, although its law codes attempted to diminish the exploitation of women. The Greek culture was patriarchal, although in the past it had had strong women leaders, the most famous of them being the Amazon people who, according to legend, had been matriarchal. Roman culture was the most patriarchal of the three, accepting only males in its civil and military leadership positions. In the Roman legal system, a woman had to be represented by a man.

This patriarchal world gradually worked its influence upon the church. By the middle of the second century, women were largely excluded from leadership in the church. The language changed, as ‘presbyter,’ ‘priest,’ and ‘bishop’ were reserved exclusively for men.

The Montanist movement in the second century, in which women leaders received direct inspiration from the Holy Spirit, is seen as evidence that some people in the early church wanted to retain the earlier patterns of women in leadership.

The practice of exclusive male leadership was given theological support by the time of Augustine. He provided theological and biblical justification for male leadership in the church, arguing that Eve was the one through whom sin entered the world. For this reason he said that women were not able to mediate God's grace to the believers. Only men could do that.

Augustine's conclusion about the subordination of women drew more upon the practices of the Roman society than it did upon Scripture. In the Roman pattern of patron and client, a woman could come before a court only if represented by a man. Augustine used this pattern to conclude that a woman could come before God only through the mediation of a man. Hence priests had to be male. Augustine's theology of the inferiority of women became the theological basis for the exclusion of women from ministry in the western world from his day to the present.

In the western culture and languages, the words that developed reflected this patriarchal view of Christianity. In the English language, when words like 'man' and 'mankind' developed as ostensibly inclusive terms, it was not accidental that they happened to be male terms. It was understood that men represented the human race before God. Women were not capable of representing themselves, let alone men, before God.

It is thus evident that inclusive language is not a modern, faddish attempt at present-day political correctness. It is rather the case that the political correctness of past centuries (in the Roman, medieval, and early modern worlds) created theological assumptions and an English language which did violence to the Christian faith. Inclusive language is thus an attempt to overcome the effect of centuries of 'political correctness' which corrupted the gospel. Inclusive language is the attempt to get back to the original inclusiveness of the Christian message.

## **What do we mean by inclusive language?**

Inclusive language is language that communicates that the gospel of Christ brings salvation for both women and men. Both are included. To proclaim that ‘Christ died for all people,’ is not the same as to say, ‘Christ died for all men.’ People might claim that in their congregation everyone knows that the sentence ‘Christ died for all men’ applies to both women and men. But in so doing the church is cutting itself off from being missionary in our society. Within the larger society many people will find the exclusive language confusing or offensive and will not be drawn to a church which seems to demote half its members. Even in communicating to its own people, young and old, such a church is promoting an exclusiveness that is not Christian.

Inclusive language calls for revising words like ‘man’ to person,’ ‘men’ to ‘people,’ and ‘mankind’ to ‘humans’ or ‘humankind.’ Using inclusive language means avoiding the constant use of ‘he’ when referring to persons generally. Inclusive language is language that acknowledges women as participants in the church, both as proclaimers and audience.

## **What is the biblical basis for inclusive language?**

The biblical basis for inclusive language is found in Genesis 1 as well as in the Bible’s revelation of Jesus Christ. According to Genesis 1:27, God created humankind, both men and women, in his image. No distinction of degree or worth between women and men is indicated in this passage. The text emphasizes that women reflect God’s image as fully as do men.

In the New Testament the inclusive message of Christ is expressed in Galatians 3:28. In this text Paul challenges the church to overcome the deepest and most significant differences which divide the church and to become one body in Christ. He states boldly that ‘There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ.’ Thus the gospel of Christ overcomes the three great divisions in the ancient world: masters and slaves, Jews and Greeks, who both thought that they were superior to the other, and the subjection of women to men.

Galatians clearly rejects the view that the gospel is intended more for men than for women, or that in the church men have a higher status than women. The gospel is for both women and men, just as it is equally available to slaves and free. Paul is also conscious of the fact that this pattern of equality of women and men is different than is practised in the larger Roman society. His statement is in effect a proclamation that in Christ men and women are equal.

In numerous other texts the Bible assumes that salvation in Christ is for all people, not only or primarily for men. John 3:16 states that ‘God so loved the worlds that WHOSOEVER believes, will have eternal life.’ There is no hint in this verse that Christ died only for men, or that men’s faith is superior, or that women need to be represented before God by a man.

Other texts that provide a powerful message about the equality of women and men are the passages on gifts in Romans 12, I Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4. In the early church most Christians were from the lower classes, many were slaves, and the majority were women. The biblical emphasis on the giftedness of all Christians is an eloquent affirmation of women and slaves, two groups not considered gifted in the Roman society of the day.

Most people will say that they readily accept the faith of women as equal with that of men. Women are not excluded from coming to God equally. If that is the case, then the church has the task of bringing its language into line with what it believes. In the past, because of the exclusive language which developed in the western world, women and men had to translate or transpose the language they heard before they were sure that it applied to them.

For example, when the church announced a men’s breakfast, women had to decide that in this use of ‘men’ they were not included, and the men had to decide that only they were included. On the other hand, when the minister proclaimed that ‘Christ died for all men,’ both women and men in the audience had to transpose the word ‘men’ in include both women and men. Both had to constantly interpret and test the language to see for whom it was meant.

Inclusive language removes the constant need for both women and men to transpose the language they hear. It removes the confusion. It allows the church to communicate directly and accurately. It makes

clear that the gospel of Christ provides salvation and liberation for all people, both women and men. What you hear is what is meant.

## **Does language influence behaviour?**

Language influences the way we treat one another. People who study situations of conflict and abuse observe that the language people use significantly influences their attitude toward others and the way they treat people. A person who is angry toward someone will frequently use violent language. If therapists or counsellors can persuade them to use nonviolent language, their attitude often softens and their behaviour becomes more peaceful.

Indeed, if someone speaks to or about a person in angry and hateful words, the language shapes how that person is seen. People influenced by such language will be tempted to relate to the person in angry and hateful ways. If children hear such language, they carry the negative attitude on. Thus people become defined by the language we use and the emotions that are carried forward by our language. Through the words we choose and the language we use, we paint a picture of how we see the world around us. Included in that picture is an indication of what we think of other people.

For example, if a church advertises for a position and includes in the advertisement the phrase ‘he shall have good people skills,’ the language indicates that only men need apply. Even though it is not stated explicitly (the writer may think that ‘he’ includes ‘she’), in our day this language signals that women are excluded. When we use language that excludes women, we reveal our own biases about how we think society and the church ought to be organized. We also promote and continue that view in the minds of people we meet, influence, and teach. Those biases are passed on from one generation to another.

Thus the language we use affects the way we act. We saw how the language of inclusion in the early church at first led to the inclusion of women. But then the language of exclusion in the surrounding Roman world gradually led to the exclusion of women. This practice of exclusion resulted in a language of inferiority about women. The language of inferiority led to centuries of practice in which women were treated as inferior.



If we use exclusive language, we are picturing and creating a world for ourselves and our hearers that does not include women as equal partners. Women come to be pictured as inferior, less worthy than men, and not to be taken as seriously when they speak.

Worst of all, exclusive language may condone and lead to violence toward women and girls. Even though exclusive language need not directly stir people to act violently toward women and girls, using language that signals that women and girls are not considered as important as men and boys, or are considered to be inferior partners, may create a climate in which harassment or abuse of women can be quietly ignored, passively excused, or even actively permitted.

The church needs to play a major role in addressing spousal and child abuse. It is a matter of justice and the will of God, based on God's will for creation and for redemption. Christians can become instrumental in changing the language and the climate of community relationships so that the tide of abuse can be stemmed. Conversely, if the church does not address its own use of language, it continues to be part of the problem of abuse.

## **What does inclusive language have to do with language about God?**

The Bible teaches that God is greater than humans and far above what humans can think. God is beyond human experience and beyond human language. God is greater than any manifestation of life on earth. God is greater than either maleness or femaleness.

God's gift of language allows us to think spiritual thoughts and to speak about God. The Bible reveals God's majesty and provides us with a rich fund of names for God. (For example, see Psalms 8 and 91.) One of the temptations throughout history has been to try to capture the essence of God in language and ideas that are too small. (For example, see Isaiah 40:12–26.) When we perceive God in our cultural and tribal forms, we try to put God into our own little boxes. All believers must be constantly on the watch against this temptation.

The best corrective of our limited images is to look to the Bible. The Bible has a rich range of metaphors, similes, and adjectives which

it uses to point to God. None of these words and expressions gives us the full picture of who God is, but when they are taken together they present us with a fuller witness.

The image of God with which we are most familiar is the father figure. Christ said that he came to reveal the Father. In the Lord's prayer, Christ taught his disciples to pray, 'Our Father...' Recent students of language point out that in biblical times the term 'father' was used as an expression of tenderness and closeness, a term of endearment. Some readers of the Bible conclude that since Jesus is the very image of God, and since Jesus was male, God has the character of maleness.

Other texts in the Bible expand this view to suggest that both males and females reflect who God is. In Genesis 1:26 we read, 'Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness."' (The original Hebrew text uses the term 'humankind,' and not 'man.')

In 1:27 the Scripture continues, 'So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.'

These two verses expand the image of God. God is reflected in both males and females. It is clear that this verse is not speaking about the physical aspects of sexuality, but about the very nature of what it means to be male and female. The writer is stating that God is great enough to include both human maleness and femaleness.

Inclusive language invites us to think of God in majestic and expanded ways, based on the Bible. This expanded view of God is reflected in a number of biblical texts. They are texts which we have tended to overlook.

In Matthew the Bible uses a male image when it speaks about God as our heavenly Father who calls us to be perfect as he is perfect (Matthew 5:48). In Isaiah the Bible uses a female image when it compares God to a woman who cries out in labour, and who gasps and pants (Isaiah 42:14). Job uses a feminine image of God when he asks, 'From whose womb did the ice come forth, and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven?' (Job 38:29). In the song of Moses we read, 'You were unmindful of the rock that bore you; you forgot the

God who gave you birth.’ God is here referred to as a person who gives birth—obvious female imagery.

Other biblical references use images which have no gender connotations. Psalm 31:3 says ‘You are my rock and my fortress.’ Deuteronomy 4:24 proclaims, ‘The Lord your God is a devouring fire.’ Zechariah 8:3 says ‘The Lord of hosts shall be called the holy mountain.’ I John says ‘that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.’ I John 4:16 says ‘God is love.’ All these images reflect the nature of God, and yet none of them makes God equal to any one image. The images help us to look to God who is greater than all.

Inclusive language for God does not mean seeing God as a woman, as a rock, as a fortress, as light, as a mountain, or even as a man. The images, metaphors, and similes are used to convey the richness and greatness of our God. Who God is includes all these images, including maleness and femaleness, but God is greater than any one of them, and even greater than all of them together.

Thus questions like ‘Does inclusive language mean that God is a woman?’ miss the point of inclusive God-language. Inclusive God-language is a matter of using a wide array of biblical images, maybe a wider array than we have used in the past or than we use today. Inclusive language means listening to the full witness of the Bible and becoming more fully biblical.

To become more inclusive in our language does not mean discarding traditional language about God. Rather it invites us to expand our traditional repertoire, some of which has been shaped by our own religious history and culture. This expansion can happen when we invite the richness of the biblical language for God to nurture our faith and our language.

## **Does inclusive language lead to rejection of the Bible as the basis of faith and life for the church?**

The Anabaptist–Mennonite tradition has always attempted to base its life and faith upon the Bible. The approach to the use of inclusive language discussed here places itself squarely within that heritage. Inclusive language, as described here, expresses the desire to be fully biblical in the use of language about both humans and God.

This discussion recognizes that some of our language in the past has been based upon only a portion of Scripture, or has sometimes even limited the gospel message of salvation in an unbiblical manner. Inclusive language is the desire to correct some of the omissions of the past by being more fully biblical in the language we use.

## **What about the biblical texts which call upon women to be silent in public, obey their husbands, and be subordinate to men?**

These texts can be divided into three different kinds.

One kind advocates equality between men and women. I Corinthians 7:1–7 is an example. Verses 3 to 5 are clear examples of equality between men and women in a world in which sexual inequality was the norm.

Another group of texts is usually called household codes (*Haustafeln*). The household code in Ephesians 5:21–33 begins with ‘Be subject to one another out of reverence to Christ.’ This is a call for women and men to become subordinate to each other under the lordship of Christ, and is not simply a call for women to be subordinate to men.

Traditionally the household codes have been read so as to place emphasis on the verse that says ‘Wives, be subject to your husbands.’ Reading the codes more carefully reveals that they do not call for women to be lorded over by men, but that they say exactly the opposite. If one reads the whole code, it is a call to accept the lordship of Christ and, under this lordship, for women and men to respect and treat each other as equals in Christ.

There are some texts that call women to be silent in the church (e.g. I Corinthians 14:34). Many people see these texts as speaking to specific situations in the early church where such an admonition may have been necessary. For example, in some cases women needed to be silent in order to avoid confusion or disorder. Such texts are similar to those which admonish women to wear head coverings and not to cut their hair. These texts speak to the culture of the day but are not authoritative for other contexts.

We can thus see that these texts which are sometimes seen as contradicting inclusive language actually do the opposite. In almost every case Paul admonishes his readers in the early church to include women more fully, and for men to treat women as equal partners in the church and in the family.

## **How can churches arrive at inclusive language?**

Churches can only arrive at a more inclusive language through a slow process of testing and discernment. There is no one form of inclusive language, and therefore Christian sisters and brothers need to be learning from each other about which new language is best. Mennonite churches, as well as all English speaking churches, are going through a major process of theological language discernment. This is a long, slow, arduous process. Different people and different churches are at different points in this search. There is no right or wrong in the process. It is important for this process to proceed with respect and patience. And yet there is also a sense of urgency, for the sake of mission.

Those who feel the urgency to change to a new language and those who want to maintain the traditional language need to listen to each other, learn from each other, pray together, and be led by the Holy Spirit. Language expresses our deepest convictions of who we are, and thus no language changes come easily. Mennonites in Canada need only think back to the recent past in which many made the language change from German to English. The change to inclusive language may be no less traumatic and just as significant.

What is at stake is the missionary task of the church grounded in obedience to the biblical witness. Will the church be able to communicate the gospel to the people in the church and beyond? Will the gospel being communicated reflect the full biblical message?

# SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

## 1. Where is our congregation at today?

Anyone who thinks language isn't important need only listen in on a discussion about inclusive language. Obviously, how we talk *is* very important to many people.

Assess what your congregation's practice actually *is*. Do you use masculine terms? Feminine terms? Neuter terms? Do you use them to refer to people? To God? Write down all the terms you can think of used in church in the past month that refer to people in general, and all the images for God. Analyze them for gender.

Does everyone agree that the gender-language used means the same thing? Or do some people think that the language is inclusive while others think it is not? Are people comfortable with the images used for God? Do some people want to use feminine images while others do not? Are differences of opinion accepted, or do they arouse anger and irritation? Is this issue volatile or not?

## 2. How does our congregation understand language change?

What kind of experiences with language change have people in your congregation had? Can people remember studying literature in school that they had problems understanding? Has anyone studied a foreign language? How many people aren't always sure what their children are talking about? List as many different kinds of language change and language conflict as you can think of.

What does this mean? Does language change shape or reflect change in society? What effect does language change have on the way people in your congregation talk, write, behave, or otherwise communicate? How do you feel about these changes?

Have people write a short descriptive paragraph using happy language, then rewrite it using sad or angry language. Then write a paragraph using feminine language and rewrite it using masculine language. Write a paragraph about God using masculine images and a paragraph using feminine images. What does this show? How do people respond differently to the different uses of language?

## 3. What does 'inclusive' mean, anyhow?

What kinds of experiences have people in your congregation had that have made you feel included, part of the group? What kinds of experiences make you feel excluded? What would an ideal world look like where *everyone* would feel included?

God's invitation includes everyone. Our congregations are called to proclaim God's word to everyone and to invite everyone in. Does your congregation invite other people to join in? Why or why not? How do you invite other people in? When you do invite people in, what kinds of things do you do to make them feel included and at home? Analyze your activities, programs, bulletin, sermons, foyer behaviour, etc., for things that might make people feel included or excluded.

How does language fit into this scheme? Have people think of experiences where the type of language used has distracted from the goal of mission, and instances where it has empowered the goal of mission.

#### **4. What does the Bible say about change, inclusion, and God?**

From creation to the time of the apostles, society in the Bible underwent significant change. Ever since the fall, people have been separated from God but are welcomed into God's realm. How does the Bible invite people to come to God? How did Jesus make people feel included? Whom did he invite in? How? What bearing does language have on these questions?

Passages to look at include Matthew 5:23–24, 9:10–17, Mark 2:13–27, Luke 6:1–11, 7:36–50, 10:25–37, John 4:5–9, John 10:7–18, Acts 8:26–40, Acts 10, I Cor 9:19–23, James 2:1–9.

What kind of language does the Bible use about God? Read Psalms 91 and Isaiah 49. What are some of the images used there?

#### **5. Where to from here?**

Is your congregation comfortable with where you're at in terms of using language that includes all people and uses a variety of images for God? Or are people pushing for change? Take a look at your language assessment (question 1). What changes can you as a group make that will satisfy some while not discomfoting others? Is there room for dialogue that respects all points of view?

# **YOUR CHANCE TO RESPOND**

The Council on Faith and Life invites your response to the question of how the language we use can be inclusive or exclusive. How has this pamphlet contributed to a fruitful discussion in your congregation?

If you wish to carry on the dialogue, write your response on this page (or another piece of paper) and send it to the Council on Faith and Life by:

- mailing it to 600 Shaftesbury Blvd, Winnipeg MB R3P 0M4
- faxing it to (204) 831-5675
- e-mailing it to [cmc@mbnet.mb.ca](mailto:cmc@mbnet.mb.ca)  
(mark your e-mail message 'attention: CFL').

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