

## MASCULINE TERMS IN THE METHODIST SERVICE BOOK (1984)

A memorial presented to the Conference of 1983 asked that the generic use of the word 'man' and other such usages be removed from *The Methodist Service Book* when it was reprinted in 1984. The Conference was not able to accept the memorial because the changes requested would have required a complete revision of the book, which, for a variety of reasons, was not in prospect. Nevertheless the Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee to produce alternative wording and to consider how it could be made available to the Church pending a full revision. An important question is at once raised concerning the scope of the alternative wording. The problem is more complex than at first sight appears. In the first place, our Lord lived in the flesh as a male. He is, therefore, referred to as Son. He prayed to God as 'Father' and the idea of this Father-Son relationship has entered into Christian theology and devotion at the deepest possible level. The same considerations do not apply to the Holy Spirit, but the language relating to the Holy Spirit rarely causes problems of this character. It may be that, in the course of time, the Church will find ways of speaking of relationships within the Trinity using language that transcends gender, but that time is not yet. At present we have no acceptable alternative to continuing with the traditional forms.

Secondly, much of the language of service books is drawn directly from the Bible. The biblical authors lived in a patriarchal society and readily used masculine language both for God and for people. The Bible, however, is a historical text with which we are not free to tamper. It can and must be interpreted for the present day, but it cannot be re-written. In some cases, language that appears unnecessarily exclusive in one translation is less difficult in another. For example, in the Ordination Service, the *Revised Standard Version* of Romans 12 uses a large number of masculine pronouns. *The Jerusalem Bible*, while being equally faithful to Paul, manages to use less. Those who read lessons in public will doubtless bear this in mind, though it would be wrong for the Conference to recommend alternative versions to those given in the text of the service book purely on this criterion.

Thirdly, there is the problem of texts, ancient and modern, that are in ecumenical use. Chief among these are the Nicene Creed, the Collects, and the 1936 Service of Holy Communion. Each text presents a different problem and unilateral revision is no answer. Further consideration will be given to the issue by ecumenical bodies. In the meantime, no changes are recommended. This applies especially to the 1936 service which, if used, should be used in its entirety.

A fourth problem concerns the hymns printed in the text. Fortunately the compilers of *Hymns and Psalms* were aware of the issue and, if congregations have both the service book and *Hymns and Psalms*, they will be able to use the latter on those few occasions when the text of a hymn presents difficulties.

There remain a number of cases where masculine words are used unnecessarily and where it is possible and advantageous to change them. Recommendations are given in a leaflet which is available from the Methodist Publishing House and which will be included in all new copies of the service book sold.

**RESOLUTION**

That the Conference adopt this report on Masculine Terms in *The Methodist Service Book*.

*(Agenda 1984, pp.23)*

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The Conference adopted the above resolution, adding:  
'but without placing any obligation on the Faith and Order Committee to eliminate the generic use of the word 'man'.