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BALANCED LANGUAGE? PART I (Reprinted from May 23, 1993)

I have had the opportunity recently to make an analysis of the latest attempt at inclusive language texts, now used experimentally throughout the Episcopal Church (in the diocese of Georgia on a volunteer basis). There is no pleasure in doing so.

When I first entered seminary at Sewanee in 1987, I was astounded at the experiment which was beginning simultaneously with my matriculation. I still possess a copy of the commentary which accompanied the appropriately styled "black book". And each time I read it, I am horrified at the tone. Arrogant, subversive, and theologically prejudiced, that particular text remains in my mind a paradigm of what has developed into a monstrous parody of the Anglican Prayer Book tradition.

The experiment has continued ever since, through two General Conventions and numerous occasions in which the faithful, especially seminarians, have been subjected to the vain imaginations of the Standing Liturgical Commission of our church. Presently, the attempt at inclusive language liturgies has taken the politically calculated step of what are now called "Balanced Language" Texts. These are prescribed as experimental options to be inserted at whim into the already option-burdened 1979 Book of Common Prayer. The approach of presenting these texts as options is itself a political maneuver, because the original intention of inclusive language texts was to replace the "inaccuracy and incompleteness of the language" used in Rite II (See the Commentary, published by the Standing Liturgical Commission, "One God, One Faith: One Prayer in Many Voices", 1987).

In order to grasp the significance of these texts, one should consider three aspects: 1) the strategy and ideology behind them; 2) the ideology and what happens to the biblical language; and 3) the theology which intends to make these texts legitimate forms of worship.

1) Strategy and Ideology.

I will never forget my instructor in Liturgics at Sewanee admonishing us not to allow our future congregations to become too attached to the 1979 Book of Common Prayer because, he said, the Episcopal Church

would have a new prayer book within ten years. The political strategy which he advanced was that if the new texts did not pass initially within the time period defined by the canons, they would persist. What did not go through at one Convention would make it through the next. That was 1987. We're just about on schedule.

The last General Convention passed a resolution which directed the Standing Liturgical Commission "to continue to study, develop and evaluate supplemental inclusive language texts as previously directed by the 68th and 69th General Conventions in consultation with the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops, among other consultants, and in consultation with the bishops, clergy, and laity of this church through a process which elicits their reactions and suggestions" and "that for the sake of perfecting such draft texts as the Standing Liturgical Commission shall de-velop, using this consultative process . . . Such use shall always be under the direction of the diocesan bishop or ecclesiastical authority" (A121s).

The intention is clear. Their mind is already made up in principle. Inclusive language is here to stay. This acceptance and determination is reflected in the current Supplemental Liturgical Materials provided by the same resolution of General Convention. In the "Preface" we read, "The subject and study of this book — the language of liturgy — are no longer new for the Episcopal Church. Since the develop-ment of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, sensitivity has grown to the power words and images have to shape our understanding and relationship with God. Along with this sensitivity has grown the commitment of the church to explore ways to make it possible for its worship to reflect this awareness and become as fully revelatory of the mystery of God and as balanced as possible in speaking of and for God's people." In other words, the original intention and rationale for inclusive language texts has not changed one bit. The political machinations have succeeded.

The Commentary of 1987 had laid the groundwork quite openly: "The general concern for more inclusive language in our worship arose during recent decades as a 'grassroots' movement that included various interest groups composed of those who strongly sensed the inaccuracy and incompleteness of the language used in worship: people from minority races and cultures, women and men committed to the feminist cause, older people, those with physical and mental handicaps, as well as those who saw the injustices and theological distortion in their exclusion, for example, liberation theologians." These self-proclaimed interest groups have succeeded over the past six years in persuading the House of Bishops and the House of Deputies toward utter folly. At the next convention, our ecclesiastical leaders will again consider a resolution (approval of two conventions is necessary for passage) in which the very Constitution of the Episcopal Church (Article X, second paragraph) will be amended to "provide for limited use for other forms of worship on an experimental basis for such periods of time and upon such terms and conditions as the General Convention may provide." If approved this time as it was at the last General Convention, the Constitution of our church will reflect the commitment of the Standing Liturgical Commission to experiment with forms of worship which need have nothing to do with the Book of Common Prayer. Will they indeed be Christian?

(to be continued)

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