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BALANCED LANGUAGE? PART II (Reprinted from May 30, 1993)

The strategy of the Standing Liturgical Commission is really quite clear for those who will read the rationale for the texts and the resolution they have proposed. It is their ideology, of course, that should be astonishing and repulsive to the faithful Christian who has been nurtured in the Anglican tradition. What is assumed is that the language of prayer which has come down to us through the centuries, and has been embodied in the Prayer Book has been, in their own words, inaccurate (i.e., inexact, incorrect, and erroneous), as well as incomplete (i.e., not fully formed, unfinished, and defective). We who thought we were worshipping the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, through the authoritative teaching of our only Mediator and Advocate, Jesus Christ, are told that his comfortable words are erroneous and defective because they do not conform to the vulgar opinions of the Standing Liturgical Commission! Our church, in their view, requires language for prayer which is accurate and complete — i.e., "balanced language"!

Finally, one often hears in response to any criticism of these texts (like this one, which is my participation in their process) that these are sincere people, dedicated members of the Episcopal Church. Well, fine. I do not for one second dispute their sincerity. It is their religious and theological mind and intention that I, as a priest of the Church of God, dispute in the name of Christ. We must be clear about this: what "balanced language" intends and means is heretical. Its ideology and strategy are designed to revise historical Christianity as Anglicans have understood and prayed it.

2) Ideology and what happens to the biblical language.

What "balanced language" intends and means comes into clearer focus by virtue of what the revisionists actually do to the language of the Bible. Two examples, particularly concerned with the presuppositions of feminists, are taken from the latest Supplemental Liturgical Materials to demonstrate my point.

Among the opening sentences for Morning and Evening Prayer is this passage for Christmas Day from John's gospel (1:14): "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." What is glaringly deficient about this attempt at "balanced language" is what is

left out. St. John, in the theological depth which characterizes his gospel, places the mystery of the Incarnation and our corresponding knowledge of the glory of that mystery all in one sentence. I quote the entire verse and mark what the revisionists delete in brackets: "{And} the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, {and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,} full of grace and truth."

Why are the faithful made to suffer this deletion? There is no textual discrepancy whatsoever among the Greek manuscripts. In this verse, St. John gives us an amazing summary of the knowledge of our salvation. The glorious nature of the Father and his only begotten Son, is revealed in the Word made flesh. Through this mystery of the Incarnation we are comforted by the received knowledge of God's grace and truth. It will not do to expunge the eternal origin of the Son from the Father as if the divine persons are accidental to grace and truth and to the Incarnation itself. Indeed, what John does here by expounding upon the divine Word as Son of the Father is to begin to articulate the altogether crucial doctrine of the Trinity. The Incarnation and the Trinity are doctrines revealed as requiring one another. But above all, what is revealed in this passage is the comfortable knowledge that the grace and truth of God are revealed in the Word made flesh, because he as the Son possesses the nature of the Father. Belief in this Word means that we become like him – children of God. Surely, this profound comfort is what a sentence of Scripture for Christmas Day should convey.

The assumptions and intention of the revisionists should not escape our scrutiny. The reason they feel free to omit this part of John 1:14 is because, they think, the names of Father and Son "figure" God as male, and while male imagery as such should be taken metaphorically and not literally, the predominance of male as opposed to female metaphors in Scripture reflects a culture of male dominated language. Their solution is to include the idea of God as female wherever possible, and because that is not everywhere possible in the Biblical text, to eliminate the predominance of male references to God; hence, the deletion of "and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father".

But what does it mean to say that the Scripture "figures" God as male? There are at least two questions here. First, do the biblical writers intend to figure God as male? And second, what is the assumption behind this inclusive ideology?

We might begin to think about the intention of the Biblical writers by recalling that it was the gnostic Manichaeans who tried to persuade Augustine against the Catholic faith by claiming Catholics believed God has hair and fingernails. From Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, Augustine learned that this was not, in fact, the Catholic view of the meaning of Scripture. (Confessions III, v).

Ambrose was not alone. Anthropomorphic metaphor was well known in the ancient world as a literary form for communicating spiritual truth. One need only cite the allegorical commentary of Philo of Alexandria on the Pentateuch, or the way in which the Greek philosophers correctly understood Hesiod and Homer, to discover this.

We should also remember that anthropomorphism was not confined

to metaphors about God. G. B. Caird reminds us that anthropomorphism also takes the form of personification in the pathetic fallacy (The Language And Imagery Of The Bible, Chapter Ten). Caird recalls the words of the Psalmist: "The waters saw thee, O God, the waters saw thee; they were afraid. . ." In order to balance the imagery we might quote the Psalmist again: "Praise the Lord from the earth, ye dragons and all deeps." Similar to these is one of my favorite passages from the Iliad in which the horses of Achilles stand apart from the midst of battle and weep for their fallen charioteer, Patroklos.

Granted the broad kinds of metaphor used in the ancient world, one cannot claim the Biblical writers intended to "figure" God as male anymore than did Homer Patroklos' horses, or the Palmist the great deep. As Caird tells us, God is portrayed in the Bible as having "head, face, eyes, eyelids, ears, nostrils, mouth, voice, arm, hand, palm, fingers, foot, heart, bosom, bowels", but Isaiah also says God does not have a body of flesh; "Now the Egyptians are men and not God, and their horses flesh and not spirit." Remember the name of God revealed to Moses, "I Am that I Am".

(to be continued)

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