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The Parish Paper

OF
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.24 No.28

Trinity Sunday 1993

10/01/05

BALANCED LANGUAGE? PART III (Reprinted from June 6, 1993)

"Inclusivists" assume there is an aspect of prejudice for a "male" metaphor as against a "female" metaphor in the Biblical writers. But given the clear opposition in the Old Testament of Yahweh to the nature religion of Baal, in which there is the dualism of the heavenly male god raining down his seed upon the earthly female goddess, this question is not simply answered on the side of feminists. Moreover, when St. John records the statement of Jesus that "God is Spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth", has he not already absolutely qualified any metaphorical sense that God the Father is male?

Is not the intention of the Biblical writers to show a relation of creatures to their Creator which is different from the natural but like it? The name of King implies a subject, Lord implies a servant, and Father a child. The advocates of balanced language would have us believe these images are burdened with bigotry and oppressive triumphalism. But the New Testament writers make it clear that God's Kingdom is not of this world; Christ's Lordship is not domination but supreme sacrifice; and divine Fatherhood is of a different nature and granted us only by spiritual adoption.

That these relations teach us something about God and ourselves is essential to the Biblical witness. But they really have nothing to do with figuring God as male in his very being, just as Homer does not mean to ask the question of whether horses grieve as human beings do, nor is the Psalmist concerned to speculate on the undulating emotions of salt water. Indeed, when Isaiah wishes to emphasize the faithfulness of God by portraying him as like a woman who cannot forsake her sucking child, in contradistinction to human mothers which may in fact do so, what is at emphasis is not any thought that God is female or male but that God's compassion is greater than ours.

Important questions remain about Biblical language. Do the Biblical writers use only one form of language when speaking of God? Leonel Mitchell, a liturgical scholar who writes the theological "background" for the "balanced language" texts, maintains that all language about God is "necessarily metaphorical or analogical", and the "more 'real' and 'personal' our notion of God is, the more anthro-pomorphic our language is likely to be." These assertions deserve a careful response in our next part, but here we should comment that what stands out to the discerning reader is the peculiar hierarchy of metaphors the

inclusivists employ. In the end the manner in which these metaphors are used reveals a tension and contradiction in the whole attempt.

If all our language of God is meta-phorical, what is it that enables the revisionists to place one metaphor as equal to or better than another? Is it the same to think of God as a lion, as it is to think of him as the Good? Those who wish to set up an hierarchy determine, for instance, that "Word" is an acceptable metaphor because it is Biblical and neutral. "Father" and "Son" are not always acceptable, because they appear too frequently, and predominate to figure a male god. Because the Biblical writers neglect metaphors that figure God as female, feminine attributes, especially those of nurturing, are wherever possible included and enhanced. The names "Lord" and "King" are changed because they imply domination and arrogance.

The assumption which enables this hierarchy finally amounts to this: It appears to the revisionists themselves that metaphorical language about God is the verbal expression of religious experience, which is categorized into male and female modes, and then subdivided into various interest groups (as the Commentary of 1987 lists them: minority races and cultures, older people, those with mental and physical handicaps, liberation theologians). But upon examination of their texts one discovers that experiential metaphors are not really of equal value, because they often reflect an historically conditioned male prejudice. This means that not only are the highest categories those of male and female, but also those as experienced properly by feminists alone. When the primary categories of male and female, thus understood, are applied to the writings of Holy Scripture, the male is seen to predominate over the female, and therefore must be balanced. This balanced language, imposed upon the Biblical texts, is what should constitute prayer. And such prayer, shaping belief, becomes in the words of Leonel Mitchell, "primary theology".

It is remarkable how wonderfully circular this rationale is. It goes something like this. "I am a feminist and I experience God as nurturing mother along with other attributes; therefore, both the Biblical text, which is a mere composite of metaphorical expression, and liturgical prayer should reflect and articulate my experience. Once my experience has been given this objective form of prayer, I recognize it as theology. Those who pray this liturgy with me will share my experience and acquire my theology." As an example of this circularity it is useful to recall the Commentary of 1987 which says: "The time may come when, by using the images of this rite in prayer, another generation may well reform and renew the perceptions and images of God sufficiently to actually call God "Mother" without hurting and alienating many faithful people" (the first attempt of 1987 to which this quote refers is now revised in Eucharistic Prayer 2 of the Supplemental Liturgical Materials – 1991).

Balanced language means that the religious experience and the "primary theology" of contemporary feminists, and their interest groups, are the measure of Biblical revelation and Christian history. We object, because their assumptions are false. It is not the Biblical writers that are concerned to portray God as male, nor are they negligent to portray God as female. Rather, it is the ideology of feminist experience that establishes the criteria and seeks to enclose the Christian religion within the ultimate dual categories of male and female. For this ideology the Standing Liturgical Commission, and the

entire supporting apparatus of the General Convention, considers editing the language of Scripture, and our tradition of Common Prayer.

(to be continued)

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