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The Parish Paper

OF
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.24 No.31

The Third Sunday after Trinity 1993

10/01/05

BALANCED LANGUAGE? PART VI (Reprinted from June 27, 1993)

St. Augustine teaches the same thing when he distinguishes the many forms of human language with which the Scripture "suits itself to babes . . . through which, as by nourishment, our understanding might rise gradually to things divine and transcendent" (De Trinitate, I). But Scripture, says Augustine, also rarely employs those propositions (again not exhaustive but true) which are said properly of God because they are not found in any creature, such as that which was told to Moses: "I Am that I Am", and that which David says: "Thou shalt change them, and they shall be changed; but thou art the same."

When we approach the doctrine of the Trinity, Thomas follows Augustine closely. Augustine claims that our structure for naming things in the terms of genus and species which is appropriate to some names of God, as the Good and the Wise, cannot apply to the Trinity. (De Trinitate, VIII). The doctrine of the Trinity is first of all revealed and then considered thoughtfully in the life of the Church. This prompts Thomas, in the midst of his theological exposition of the doctrine of the Trinity, to claim God the Father is called Father and God the Son is called Son proprie et non metaphoricè because the Son as the divine Verbum subsists eternally in the divine nature and has as its principle the Father. According to Thomas, because a word does not subsist forever in human nature but comes and goes, the conception of the Word is properly said of the divine nature, and paternity is naturally of God the Father, and we might say, only metaphorically of us! (Summa Theologiae I.33.2 Respondeo, ad 3). The Aristotelian distinction still holds true. Our language of God is neither univocal nor equivocal but analogous. The point at issue is the principle of the analogy.

So we come to the crux of the matter. The confidence of the early Church Fathers, in the West and East, to name God, stems from the revelation of God in the Scriptures, and particularly in Christ. Gregory of Nazianzus will not hear of those who attempt to name God by mere metaphorical ejaculation: "It is very shameful, and not only shameful, but very foolish, to take from things below a guess at things above, and from a fluctuating nature at the things that are unchanging, and as Isaiah says, to seek the Living among the dead." (The Fifth Theological Oration). When Gregory of Nyssa attempts to understand the doctrine of the Trinity, he first clarifies the inadequacy of customary naming (logic) as it is found in Scripture and Tradition, not to deny these, but to elucidate them. Nevertheless, when he seeks to

unravel the doctrine through his own logic by speaking of the relations of the divine persons as Cause and Caused, he defines his meaning by the Scriptural names of the Father and his Only Begotten Son (Quod Non Tres Dei).

Clearly, the method of the Fathers is to receive the revelation of the Scripture and to meditate upon its meaning. There is no crude literalism which pictures God the Father as male. Rather the early Fathers are concerned to understand the profound depths of revelation. St. Augustine, for instance, concludes his long treatise on the Trinity by thinking of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as the divine memory, intellect, and will, the principle of all personality. Still, Augustine's metaphysical speculations do not permit him to alter the biblical revelation. For him, rather, the Bible is the ground and measure for spiritual understanding. For most of the history of Christian theology it is incorrect to say "the more 'real' and 'personal' our notion of God is, the more anthropomorphic our language is likely to be." Augustine, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa, indeed the vast majority of the Christian tradition East and West could discern the difference and so can we, both in theology and in the language of prayer.

ii) The Principle. At the heart of "Balanced Language" is a presupposition which is decidedly anti-Christian. It is the idea that the revelation of the Bible and Christian history have through the prejudice of the Biblical writers obscured a genuine experience of God which is now at last come to light with feminism. But the real and appalling prejudice is in fact with the revisionists who presume to deny two forms of spiritual freedom, namely that of God and of man.

Above all else, the Christian must remember that the religion of Christ is grounded in the freedom of God. It is his being alone which enjoys the absolute liberty of spirit. God lacks nothing. His perfect wisdom is equal to his power and his power to his love. This is the freedom, so far beyond the realm of human knowing, that is in Christ. "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him." Jesus says explicitly and quite to the exclusion of any other claims: "All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him".

The sine qua non of Christian knowledge and the enduring practice of faith, especially in our life of common prayer, is that God is free to speak to us, and out of his love has spoken definitively in his Son. Neither our sin nor our mistaken ideology nor our finite experience can preclude the liberty of the divine spirit to reveal himself as the primary end of all spiritual desire. "The hour cometh and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him".

Certainly, the most profound unity of the whole Bible is this very freedom with which God speaks. With delight we remember this passage of the psalmist: "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made. . ." With fear and trembling we recall the admonition of Jeremiah: "Hear O earth: behold, I will bring evil upon this people, even the fruits of their thoughts, because they have not hearkened unto my words. . ." With humble comfort we hold firm the words of

our Saviour: "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

What inclusive language does by rejecting revelation in principle is to usurp the freedom of God and deny the equality of his wisdom and power and charity. Sadly and ironically, such a presumption is the final nail in the coffin of human experience. For out of the divine freedom, and from nowhere else, comes the freedom of human creation and redemption.

(to be continued)

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