

A LUTHERAN REFLECTS ON INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE AND THE CREEDS

Pygmy liberation, pygmy liberation, that was something I had not thought about. Yet the more it was brought to my attention, the more it became clear that here injustice is being done. That pygmies are oppressed is evident. Weaker than the surrounding tribes, they are robbed of their lands and driven farther into the jungle. When they wish to subsist on more than hunting, they can do manual labor for the surrounding tribes, but the surrounding tribes despise and look down on pygmy workers. Curiously, the pygmy females are considered by the surrounding tribes to be desirable mates. Females of average height, however, do not desire pygmy mates. Thus, although pygmies are genetically distinct, their lives are being hampered by outside forces. Pygmy lib needs pygmy theology. For pygmies have a different life experience. They see things from a different perspective. Things even small different at their level. Because of their weight and height, they are able to move easily beneath the jungle canopy. Since they are slight of build and have proportionately more skin exposed to the air than we do, they tolerate the heat of the tropics more easily than persons of average weight and height.

Midgets face similar problems. I had not thought about them either, but I had thought about the plight of left-handers because several close relatives are left-handed. Except when writing Hebrew and Chinese, they are at an enormous disadvantage in our word-oriented society. They try to pre-empt the "left" corners at dinner tables. Special equipment has been developed for many of their needs, but for the most part, except for places like first base, left-handers are short-changed, their needs simply ignored. Our language even labels evil "sinister" and those who are able "dextrous." Lest anyone think these are merely frivolous examples, let me relate how astounded the COCU Commission of Theology was when Rev. Wilke, born without arms, told us the handicapped person finds the phrase, the "whole people of God," offensive.

Children's lib has been mentioned.

Those living west of the Missouri in North Dakota simply think differently from

those in the eastern half of the state. Their life experience is different. For this reason some of us developed a "West River Catechism" so that the different theological stance would be made explicit. But then we discovered that southwestern North Dakota is different from northwestern North Dakota.

I Method

John Courtney Murray has pointed out that all questions in theology are really the "God" question. It could just as well be said that all questions in theology are "method" questions. What is one's starting point? The classical term for describing this question is "the analogy problem." Today the same question is discussed in terms of "symbol." Whatever the terminology, the challenge is always the same; Feuerbach stated the question in its most trenchant form, that man created God in his own image. The Bible does not address this question in a speculative way, although the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon does (13:3-5).

One way to understand "method" is to try to classify various approaches that have been tried:

1. Via negationis. Finally, according to this approach, all that can be said of God is what he is not; he becomes like the "x" in an algebraic formula. Even vague abstractions like "unmoved mover," "truth," and "goodness" are unwarranted human projections.

2. Reason. At one time reason was "the" method; today it is more acceptable to begin with faith! Even analytic philosophers do not agree about the nature of reason, which seems to have been swallowed up by sociology, statistics, and historicity. At best reason today produces "statistical averages" about God.

3. Church. But where can I find the church? And: which church?

4. Experience. But whose experience? Is "my" experience of God determinative or even valid? This would imply that I had a kind of direct revelation from God; how can I claim my experience of God is valid over against experiences others have? The danger is that of falling into the ad hominem fallacy, especially in its subform called "poisoning the well"; this asserts that what others claim cannot be valid

because they are prejudiced, whereas I hold a position which is valid because it is mine.

A further question is whether we are delimited by our concrete experiences and whether one cannot know another's experience without concretely entering into that experience. For example, Dostoevsky in The Possessed wrote of how Stavrogin confessed raping a young girl; psychiatrists have asked how he could have written with such insight without himself being Stavrogin, but there is no evidence to support such a thesis. In the last century a woman, George Eliot, wrote many novels, among them Silas Marner, from the male point of view and people were convinced the author was male. Gustave Flaubert wrote Madame Bovary and women have held he had amazing insight into feminine experience. Thus it is at least arguable that I can know another's experience without concretely having that experience and even perhaps that there is a kind of "universal" experience. But why should "universal" experience of God be valid about God either? Feuerbach redivivus!

5. Metaphor. With the exception of the copulative, words are metaphors, symbols, images, icons.

Words strain

Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.

T. S. Eliot

All language is imperfect.

All language is hurtful.

All language referring to God is equivocal and incommensurate.

Take the case of the "homoousion." J. N. D. Kelly has described how the word was variously used in the period around 325 A. D. Paul of Samosata is reported to have held at the synod of Antioch in 268 A. D. that the Word was "homoousios" with the Father. Origen, Dionysius of Alexandria, and Dionysius of Rome used the term in its generic sense, meaning homogeneous, of the same (kind of) nature, and this is what the fathers at Nicea must have intended to underscore. Yet some Western bishops

understood the word to mean unity of substance. And "...quite soon after the council we find Eusebius of Caesarea accusing Eustathius of Antioch (one of its ardent champions of reading a Sabellian meaning into the word."

There is thus a sense in which it is unrealistic to speak of the theology of the council. While different groups might read their own theologies into the creed and its key-word, Constantine himself was willing to tolerate them all on condition that they acquiesced in his creed and tolerated each other.

The Cappadocians held to "homoeousios" but came to understand it in the sense of Athanasius. (Early Christian Doctrines, Harper and Row, 1960², 118, 235-7, 252-5 et passim.)

The question is: which meaning of "homoeousios" is binding, the one held by the fathers at Nicea or the one held by the later church? If Nicea, is every possible meaning acceptable, or the meaning held by the majority? If the later church, what standing does Nicea have?

II Particularity

This is the more important question. God chose to become one of us, including our language and even our death. As Irenaeus repeatedly pointed out, unless God was truly one of us, our salvation is not sure; furthermore, unless in the process God remains God, our salvation is not sure. Truly one of us! What does this mean? It means finitum capax infiniti. Such phrasing is useful because it brings out the fact that disjunctive logic does not apply. The incarnation, in other words, is not a myth or truth or idea, that which the human mind can manipulate. To the contrary, the incarnation is that which tells us who we are, that which stands over against us, "das Gegenüber."

In the early church the deadly threat was Gnosticism, for no matter how Gnosticism is defined, it reduced the incarnation to a myth or truth or idea, that which the human mind can manipulate and speculate about. In the incarnation God did not quite truly become one of us and he surely did not take part in our death. Nor was he truly "uns gegenüber," for his real mission was to bring us knowledge, in fact to awaken in us knowledge we already had. And the same threat continues today.

To answer this deadly threat Christians insisted that in the incarnation God was

truly born like any baby, born of a woman, born a male, born a Jew--not a Greek or any other, born in a specific place, that he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, a specific ruler at a specific time in history, that he truly died, that this is not a myth but happened once for all (cf. Rom. 6:10). Particular attention should be paid to the crucifixion, for this is a broken symbol, a reverse metaphor, the transvaluation of all values--that God should die on a cross can only be talked about sub contrario, for this cross is not simply another trial or tribulation. Here, in judgment, our metaphors fail, we do not talk about God, for he tells us who we are. Only by faith can this come home to us.

Even if one takes a very critical approach to the New Testament materials, something remains of a very particular relationship which Jesus had with God. Jesus understood himself to be God's son in a unique way or, conversely, God to be his father in a unique way (cf. especially Mt. 11:27 and studies on "Abba" by Joachim Jeremias). In the Gospel according to John the uniqueness of the relationship between Jesus the son and God the father is further explicated (cf. Jn. 1:14, 18; 6:45-6; 11:41-2; 12:27-8; 14:7, 9, 28). Some have been misled by Jn. 4:24: "God is spirit," into thinking that here God's essence is defined, but "it means that God is Spirit toward men because He gives the Spirit (xiv 16) which begets them anew" (R. E. Brown, John, I:172). Similar constructions are found in I John 1:5 and 4:8. Paul records that "Abba" was used by the earliest Christians when they prayed (Rom. 8:16; Gal. 4:6). "He is the image of the invisible God...." (Col. 1:15).

But after the resurrection did Jesus become the Christ and therefore is no longer male, Jewish, and the like? Did Jesus join the angelic chorus singing "I ain't got no body!"? Whatever position one might hold on the theological argument over whether the logos was "asarkos" from all eternity, the church has consistently held that the logos remains "ensarkos" to all eternity. Jesus cannot be separated from the Christ; "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever" (Heb. 13:8).

This may surprise. Does one not escape this life through death? Did not Jesus return to God, as it were? First of all, is God personal? But what is meant by "person"? Do we truly mean "mask"? Surely in prayer Christians through the

centuries have not meant "mask." C. C. J. Webb in God and Personality defined "person" as being aware, active, and purposive. Conversely, is God a series of abstractions, such as goodness, truth, and love? These are all interesting speculations. Second, can "person" exist without body and what is "body"? In spite of C. C. J. Webb, it is hard to imagine that "person" could exist without "body." Paul does indicate that there is a "break" between existence before death and existence after death (cf. I Cor. 15:42-57; 2 Cor. 5:1-4; Phil. 3:21). Yet in either case existence is "bodily," as Paul makes very clear. "Person" is "body." Body is the arena in which a person exists, it is the possibility of communication, it is what a person does and what happens to a person. Thus a person cannot be divided into an "inner" part, made up of perhaps feeling or understanding, and an "outer" part which could be neglected or rejected. (On this whole subject, see E. Schweizer on "body" in the TNT.) "Body" includes sexuality (Rom. 4:19; I Cor. 6:18; 7:4) It says, to be sure, that there will be no marriage in heaven (Mt. 22:30); this does not mean those who are resurrected are either bodiless or sexless. The church is Christ's body (I Cor. 12:12-13). Christ is bodily present in the Eucharist (I Cor. 10:16-17; 11:23-4).

After the resurrection Jesus continued to be "body," although of course he was transformed into a "resurrected body." It is reported that the disciples touched him (Mt. 28:9; cf. Lk. 24:39; Jn. 20:27); it is reported that he ate a piece of broiled fish (Lk. 22:41-4; cf. Acts 10:31). He was both seen and heard. He continues to be the one "crucified" (I. Cor. 1:23; 2:2; masc. perf. pass. part.). Are we then to suppose that he exists in a female, or unisexual, or bisexual, or hermaphroditic state? One of these possibilities has to be picked if he did not continue to be male for it is not possible to be "body" and sexless.

It is important for the reader to keep in mind that the Pauline concept of "body" is more complex than simply "meat and bones." But then sexuality may be more complex than simply the sexual organs involved in procreation. A Catholic nun recently wrote: "In a very deep sense, one is one's sex" (The Tablet, Nov. 26, 1983, p. 1151). How this all combines with unius substantiae needs to be worked out.

Possibly in this case the complexity of substantia can be brought out. Whatever is done, the finitum capax infiniti dare not be impaired. Because of salvation.

III Promise

More important than the question of particularity is the promise. But in order to describe the promise it is necessary to ask why the promise is needed. Sin. Or to put it more biblically: "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law" (I Cor. 15:56). Or traditionally: sin, death, and the power of the devil. Sin is that problem we have over against God, a holy God, first of all, and then over against our neighbors. Thanks be to God, we have been liberated from sin, death, and the power of the devil. Through Jesus Christ. Through the particularity. Through faith in the particularity, that Jesus Christ died and rose for you and me. This is the promise.

But how do I know all this? Do I have a "more excellent way" than the ways analyzed in Section I, numbers 1-5? Is this number 6: "facts through faith"? Not really. Something rather different is involved, a Lutheran stance, Lutheran hermeneutics.

Lutherans take tradition very seriously. The Lutheran Confessions often quote the church fathers. Lutherans make use of traditional materials. The Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds are at the very beginning of the Book of Concord (Tappert 18-21). The first article of the Augsburg Confession states: "Yet there are three persons of the same essence and power, who are also coeternal: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" (Tappert 27-8). These same names for the trinity are used in Luther's Catechisms (Tappert 344-6; 411-20 et passim). But Lutherans are not content to repeat tradition. Not only are they famous for the slogans: Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone, but Luther repeatedly summed up their stance by emphasizing: crux sola nostra theologia. Revelation is found only in Jesus Christ: we are freed from finding God in external places, "our place is Jesus Christ, for God has ordained to hear nothing unless through him" (WA 40, 3:52, 2ff.); "who has a God without his word has no God" (WA 30, 3:213, 34); "whoever tries to find God except in Jesus

finds the devil (WA 40, 3:337, 11).

What does all this sloganizing mean? It means that for Lutherans method and final authority lie in the proclamation of the promise. To put it another way, if you ask me about method and final authority, my proper response is to proclaim to you the promise that for Christ's sake all your sins are forgiven. Because that is your need. Because of sin. Because this promise is the answer to your need. And if you ask why this promise, I will try to proclaim the promise to you again. It is in the proper usus of the promise that proper method and final authority lie; the proper method is found in the proper distinction between law and gospel, which means making sure that salvation is not by works of the law but by faith in Christ alone, and the final authority lies in the fact that through the Holy Spirit the promises are self-authenticating. This is what it means to live by faith alone; our problem is not finitude, but sin, and the cross alone tells us what sin really is and God's answer to sin. This is, from a (sinful) human point of view, to live sub contrario, paradoxically, not by reason or experience, but in an eschatological tension simul iustus et peccator. "For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23). As children Lutherans used to memorize Luther's explanation to the third article of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or understanding believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel...." Thus Lutherans take creeds and formulations in creeds very seriously, but for Lutherans the decisive question is whether the usus of these formulations has been faithful to the proper distinction between law and gospel.

IV Re-present

What is meant by "re-present" has become a key factor for two issues involving inclusive language and the creeds.

1. Females have been told that only males can be ordained because only males can re-present Christ, a male. If ordained ministry means re-presenting Christ, the logic of this position is compelling. Feminists have to reject Christ's maleness if they are to qualify as re-presenters of Christ. If, however, ordained ministry means

proclaiming the promise, then proclaimers of the promise cannot be restricted to those who are male, Jewish, or whatever. Re-presenting is not the issue.

2. Females often seem to think that they cannot "identify" with a savior who is male, that such a one cannot "re-present" them. It is true that the re-representative doctrine of the atonement can be found in the New Testament (cf. Heb. 2:17). Yet it is also true that many other doctrines of the atonement are present in the New Testament, such as redemption, propitiation, justification, victory, reconciliation, and more. Lutherans, as is well-known from Aulen's book Christus Victor, have emphasized the victory motif.

The re-representative doctrine of the atonement, though present, is not the only or even dominant motif found in the New Testament. As such, it must be understood within its limits. If understood with wooden literalism, it would mean, because Jesus is "without blemish" (Heb. 9:14; sacrificial term. tech. from the OT), that handicapped persons would feel themselves excluded from salvation. If the shroud of Turin be genuine, he was a male about 5'11" in height; does that mean pygmies are to feel excluded from salvation? He was a Jew; what does that do to those who are yellow-skinned, or black? No, he was our re-representative because he was tempted like us, bore our sins, and died our death (cf. Heb. 2:14-18; 4:15-5:10; 7:26). The metaphor dare not be pressed; if "my love is like a red, red rose," does that mean she has green leaves? The same is true of justification and liberation.

V Homework

1. Development does take place. For centuries the church defended slavery on biblical grounds. Since the Enlightenment (with a tragic nod toward South Africa), the church has fought slavery. As society has given women the right to vote, more and more churches have followed suit. Germans and Scandinavians do not abstain from eating blood (Acts 15:29).

2. "Test the spirits" (I Jn. 4:1-3). The church has always been concerned to keep the faith. Many "spirit"-led movements have come and gone. Speaking in tongues. Free love. Communal property. Anti-materialism. Do these movements serve others,

or are they a form of self-aggrandizement? Is that which is essential in the faith being eroded? Is the baby being thrown out with the bath water?

What are the outer limits to the move that is made? Is it really relativism? Is it of the time or for all time? Is, for example, feminism that which because of its inner dynamic abandons the Christian faith, as in the case of Mary Daly?

The Spirit will lead.