2725 15 Mar 95

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS
309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone 508.775.8008
Noncommercial reproduction permitted

WHAT, NOW, IS "FAITHFUL WITNESS" ?

In my Thinksheets, "we" often means humans, usually means Christians, & sometimes means members of my particular communion, the United Church of Christ. As this Thinksheet is for a chapter in a "Confessing Christ" book addressed to my denomination, "we" means ***primarily*** *members of the UCC; but as the subject is a question for* ***all*** *Christians, my treatment of it ripples out to all Christians, and even beyond.*

1 What comes to mind when you hear the phrase "faithful witness"? Into my mind comes (1) the fact that the phrase is biblical, and (2) Bible passages in which the phrase occurs in the King James Version, whence it obtained wide currency in our English language and literature. None of this, however, is mentioned in the Summer, 1994, issue of NEW CONVERSATIONS ("Published by the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries"), in which not a few UCCers say, in the context of our church's current theological emphasis on being "Attentive to the Word," what "faithful witness" means to them. Our church is, today, just not that biblically minded. What, pray, can "faithful witness" mean in a church that is not biblically minded? Not much, and anything.

2 But can't we be faithful witnesses without have an "Authorized Version" concordance programmed into our soft, warm, gray computers? Of course! Else, "Lord, who then can be saved?" But what about the sound-worlds underneath KJV and all other English versions and translations: can we be faithful witnesses without hearing the Hebrew and Greek of "faithful" and "witness"? Caution: here, do not lightly say "Of course." For we cannot be faithful witnesses if we have no care for, do not care about, the roots of the roots of "faithful witness," the sounds-images-ideas through which our earliest spiritual forebears, the "cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1), spoke for God in their times and places.

Can we be faithful in our time and places while ignorant of what being faithful meant in their time and place? Does not low interest in Bible study correlate with low concern for being a faithful witness in the biblical-historical sense, the fundamental sense in which the phrase "faithful witness" makes sense in Christian talk?

3 Time to give you some concretions of what I'm talking about. To begin with, being faithful meant/means beginning sentences with "God...." The Bible's central subject should be ours, though you'd have no friends if you were to turn this guideline into a boring habit (as some superpious do). Snoopy, in yesterday's cartoon, has the right idea. He begins the sentence with Jesus, continues with "own," & ends by connecting with his existence, viz., dogness. (Let's connect dogness with the Bible: does anybody in the Bible own a pet dog? Nobody but Tobias: Tobit 6:1, 11:4.) Snoopy is always dogminded, as we are selfminded. He's often Bibleminded, sometimes Jesusminded: to be faithful, must I be always Godminded (as a theist) and (as a Christian) Jesusminded? Yes, e.g. as I was hospital-calling today. Then, can I be always faithful? No, or what's the liturgical Confession of Faith for? (Not that failure to "pray without ceasing" [1 Thessalonians 5:17] is the only sin!)

4 We are enjoined to "always be ready" (1 Peter 3:15) to witness. But since we're not always Deityminded, we're not always ready (to use my metaphor) to begin the sentence with "God" or "Jesus" or "The Spirit." At the other extreme from the ideal of perpetual Deitymindedness is Deityamnesia, which is functional atheism (e.g., Psalm 10:4), sometimes becoming aggressive (56:5). (Adam & Eve's sin was that they couldn't think of the apple and God at the same time.) The Book of Common Prayer warns us against "wanderings of mind and [a consequence] coldness of heart"; and the Psalmist prays for the humility to let God "know my thoughts" (139:23).

+

Since the Bible's for what Wm. James called "healthy-minded" religion, I'm not preaching the *idée fixe* of compulsive, nondirigible attention, like a dog tied on short leash to a stake. Rather, God wants us to go sniff out everything, while always being aware of the Presence at the other end of the long leash. Not a biblical figure, but this one is: "take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5)....And a warning against excessive attention to words:

What gets our attention gets us, and God sometimes directs our attention to himself nonverbally. The Voice speaks only after Moses attends to the burning bush (Exodus 3:3; Moses/Jesus religion begins not with earholes but with eyeballs). Peter gets sprung lose from dietary Judaism while thinking about a pig let down in a net from heaven (Acts 10:19-28, which has two actions: the heaven-net, with a pig +, a vision Peter was "still thinking of" when invited to fraternize with goys, to whom he says, "God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean"). From each Testament I've given an example of faithful meditation occasioned by divine action. (Being faithful means learning biblical meditation, which is prophylactic against gurus, swamis, and all that Eastern ilk that grabs the attention of the biblically ignorant and ignoring)....But back to words:

5 In NC (said issue of NEW CONVERSATIONS) 42f, the executive of the board producing NC, our BOOK OF WORSHIP, and the upcoming NEW CENTURY HYMNAL rues the biblical ignorance that makes church-mainliners dumb, silent, when confronted by an evangelical Scripture-spouter: liberal Christians should be capable of counter-quoting, but "we don't know the Bible well enough," so we "give the impression that someone more knowledgeable about the written word than we are is closer to God's truth." In this situation, the inference is, "we" do not have the knowledge and skill to be faithful witnesses.

Well, why do "we" not have that knowledge and skill? Because on the witnessing front, we've been about other business than Bible-mastering. Good Business, of course, deriving its energy from the Bible's ethical impulses to Good, especially to justice and kindness in public (ecopolitical) as well as private (personal) affairs. Without that, no faithful witness to the God "whose words and deeds are one." But the third divine expectation in the passage we all love (and that was my father's favorite Bible verse both as a human being and as a judge: Micah 6:8) is that we "walk humbly with your God," practicing the Presence in God-consciousness, God-conversation, and God-talk.

6 Those Scripture-spouters whom it's so easy and comfortable for liberal Christians to look down on, for the secret satisfaction looking down on putative inferiors provides--they have a third thing in addition to biblical knowledge (being free *in* the Bible) and skill (being free *with* the Bible, to use it in faithful witness): instead of being ashamed of it, they're proud of it. But we have been growing steadily more ashamed of the Bible.

Am I exempting myself? In a course I titled "Racism, Sexism, Classism, and Nationalism in the Old Testament," I had, in addition to Christians, rabbis of Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform persuasions. I remember how keenly those Orthodox Jews pressed upon us that the Hebrew Bible had in it nothing to be ashamed of. Reminded me of the brief stretch I did as a Protestant fundamentalist.

7 But--unlike many of my liberal Christian compeers--I am not ashamed of the way the Bible speaks of God, though my church officially, in effect, is. Take, e.g., NC (said issue of NEW CONVERSATIONS):

(1) It's ashamed of naming God by the Trinity's Holy Names "Father" and "Son": the first never occurs even though (as in the Lord's Prayer) it was the main way Jesus wanted us his followers to address God; and while "Son" occurs once, it's only in a quotation (from the Preamble to our UCC Constitution).

(2) It's ashamed of "Lord" even though that's the only title of Jesus in the earliest Christian creed ("Jesus is Lord," referred to on p.40). "Lord" is never used in the normal way of the Old Testament, as a title for God. And the only other references to Jesus as Lord are in connection with our Reformed beginnings (pp. 7 and 15) and in reference to the crown in the UCC symbol (p.13).

(3) It's ashamed of the Bible's pronominal way of referring (OT) to God

+

and (NT) to God and Jesus, viz. as he, his, him(self). Consider this diametrical: the Bible *always* refers to God and Jesus so: NC *never* does! An astonishing maximal pronominal opposition.

The extremism of this triple lexical self-censorship fails to shock our folk not only because of their biblical illiteracy but because this oddity, which will prove a mere blip on the screen of church history, has come upon us slowly. A frog thrown into hot water will jump out: a frog in cold water will sit there and boil if the water temperature is raised slowly.

It's fatuous to think we can be faithful witnesses to the God of the Bible if we're so ashamed of the way the Bible speaks of God that we suppress, in our minds and mouths and publications, the Bible's own natural, normal, consistent idiom.

8 To help you feel the radicality of what has happened, and the severity of the LC (linguistically "correct") suppression, consider, on the third suppression:

(1) Our Statement of Faith, being thoroughly biblical, uses masculine pronominals for God **21 times** (he, 7; his, 9; him, 4; himself, 1). In the only form appearing in the new UCC hymnal, guess how many of those instances are deleted? **All**! What is at work here is not obedience to General Synod, which continues to recommend the Statement of Faith (along with two versions of it) for use in the churches. What is at work is not the honesty of documentary integrity. Rather, what is at work is politics, gender politics.

To see the intention to obscurantory deception, turn to p.4 of the hymnal Sampler. Under "Creeds and Affirmations of Faith," you will see that while the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed appear in two "versions" (the word should be "forms," as "versions" are take-offs from an original), our Statement of Faith does not appear, but only one of the versions thereof. But we should not be surprised: always and everywhere, ideological dogma sacrifices honesty.

In our UNITED CHURCH NEWS, I was quoted as saying the new hymnal will be fair only if it "offends everybody" in properly aiming to please everybody. Well, it turns out that the only ones it doesn't offend are our linguistic extremists on the left. In light of what the hymnal did to the Statement of Faith, you should expect, and will get, radical bowdlerization of the old hymns (purging them not only of all masculine pronominals for God but also of most of their use of masculine names of and titles for God--e.g., Father, Son, Lord, King) and new hymns written according to the restrictive code aimed at demasculinizing Deity, the banning code euphemistically called "Inclusive Language Guidelines."

A further instance, in the hymnal affair, of ideology excluding honesty: pastors were sent each a copy of the hymn-list to post so people could look to see whether their favorite old hymns made it. But the actual first-lines index, when the hymnal is published, will refer from the old first-line to the new--and often give a sour surprise! But for many it will be too late: the churches are being pressured to buy a pig in a poke, signing up for the new hymnal sight unseen. We're all familiar with ideological dirty tricks, but they somehow seem even diretier when with benefit of clergy, under church auspices.

(2) Who gets to ask the questions controls the dialog: who gets to choose the words controls the concepts. All this lexical demasculinizing of the biblical God, while having no effect on God, severely affects the **God-idea**. When you stop calling a squirrel of unknown sex "he" and change to "it," the trope doesn't change the squirrel but it does reduce the human sense of relatedness to a fellow-creature. The God who was "he" and becomes addressed only as "it" is a God not only demasculinized but also **depersonalized**. Eight years ago (15 Apr 87 THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY), the present president of Hartford Theological Seminary, an ultrafeminist in language for God, admitted "I had a problem" when coming to "refuse any gender-specific 'God language.' God was the Holy One, the Rock, the Wind, the Spirit, the Eternal or the Still Small Voice"--but all those predications are impersonal. And when I pointed out to Leander Keck that his Beecher Lectures (published as THE CHURCH CONFIDENT, Abingdon/93) call God "it" but never "he," he at first denied it, then alibied that (1) he didn't want to offend anybody and (2) he did want to "communicate with my audience." That's the mentality that explains the verbal behavior of not a few of the authors in NC, and it reveals how the frog got boiled. As for +

not offending anybody, count me out: I'm offended, and disgusted, and doubtful of the survival of the liberal mainline churches.

This unwitting impersonalism splays easily out into what increasing numbers of Americans consider reasonable religion, viz. pantheism--as Eliade would put it, masculine transcendence having collapsed into feminine immanence. (See p.250 of the most profound linguistic and philosophical critique of ultrafeminism, Francis Martin's THE FEMINIST QUESTION: Feminist Theology in the Light of Christian Tradition, Eerdmans/94.)

(3) PARADOX: Unashamedly using "he" for God frees the Christian imagination to expand the feminine predications of God. Julian of Norwich's SHOWINGS is Christian literature's most developed sense of the feminine in God, who is nonetheless always "he" for her. E.g., this in chapter 59: "God is our mother;...he..., he...." You get 2 for 1, or nothing: God as masculine with feminine imagery (for from the one biblical God comes all the best of what we call masculine and feminine), or nothing (i.e., impersonalism). Once we outgrow the present sexual transcendentalized politics, we'll recover the biblical way of **balance** and make faithful witness to it....Same for the Trinity (FM 241): "It is as though once the identity of the Persons of the Trinity was secure, once the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were intimately known, people felt free to speak of them, especially the Son and the Spirit, in feminine terms." Failing to distinguish between analogy and metaphor, "feminist scholars" take the images "to be culturally conditioned efforts to articulate individual experiences rather than a socially shared means [p.242] of mediating knowledge of God."

9 We aren't faithful witnesses if we (to use a figure of a former student of mine, NC 52) "tiptoe around when we should be walking." Fear of encounter in telling the Story (WHAT DO YOU SAY AFTER YOU SAY HELLO?, to use an Eric Berne title) is bad enough; add to it feeling ashamed at the way the Bible speaks of God, and the evangelism-and-mission mouth is shut. The church of the shut mouth is soon the church of the shut door with nobody inside. Ours is a crisis not only of *bene esse* (well-being) but of *esse* (being, survival). (Your concordance will give you a score of scriptures cautioning against being ashamed of the biblical God, some with what happens to us when in response God becomes ashamed of us.)

And the third in the unholy trinity of mouth-shutting feelings is disorientation, not being able to play the game because you don't know where you are vis-à-vis home plate, which also you don't know the location of--in computer jargon, you don't know how to "access" home (plate). For our ancestors, home plate was "Jesus Christ, the faithful witness" (Revelation 1:5, 3:14) known, by the Spirit, in and through the canonical Scripture, the Old and New Testaments. On a walk with me much more than a half century ago, a to-be president of the University of Chicago said, "I fear few have the courage to be canonical Christians. Most carve out some pieces and build themselves a comfortable little canon within the big canon." Then these little canons, inflating themselves, become amnesiac about the big canon and alien to the other little canons. Results? Not only the paranoid tribalism of loneliness, but also a demonic Hobbesian "war of all against all." My war is all the canon against all the little canons--e.g., such isms as ultrafeminism, vitalism ("pro-life all the way"), pacifism, and fundamentalism. (Distinction: Feminism expands women's confidence and opportunities; ultrafeminism contracts the Bible's way of speaking of God. I am a feminist and an anti-ultrafeminist. In his detailed attack on all the major ultrafeminist hermeneuts, FM [*passim*, THE FEMINIST QUESTION] shows how their little canon came to dominate [!] the alleged androcentric-patriarchal-hierarchical rest of the Bible--an imperialist liberationism now exercising dominion over the offices of many liberal-church ecclesiarchs. FM has extensive footnotes and a 32-p. bibliography, including a book being recommended for preparation for Craigville Colloquy XII [17-21 July, on language for the Trinity]: the excellent SPEAKING THE CHRISTIAN GOD: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism, ed. by A.F.Kimel Jr. [Eerdmans/92].)

10 Faithful witness is something we are given to do before it is something we try to do. And the Spirit gives it to us together as well as severally, in devotion to God and in dialog, sometimes in painful debate, with one another in our church.