

**"LANGUAGE AS POWER AND FAITHFULNESS"**\*

\* A proposed title for Craigville Theological Colloquy XV

1 Only once in a biblical passage is one person named thrice--a fact which, when one attends to this passage, calls one's attention to (1) the naming process & (2) the human need to name (which first appears, as a divine curiosity [God curious to see what the man Adam would name "every living creature"], in Gn.2.19-20)....I infer the need from (1) the universality of the activity & (2) the functionality of the activity (to enable human beings to act responsibly [in the Gn. context, having "dominion"])...I infer, secondly, that the reason we aren't asked to name God is that we have no dominion-responsibility over him--& besides, he undertakes to name himself, & us as being under his dominion.

2 Nor do we get to name the Warrior Messiah of our passage. Rather, we're told that his name is "**Faithful and True**" (v.11; who "judges and makes war"). Next name (v.13): "**The Word of God.**" Next name (v.16, a Persian title ["Shah en shah"]), "**King of kings and Lord of lords.**" But besides those three, "he has a name...that no one knows but himself" (v.12). Warrior? He carries his sword in his teeth, as it were (v.15, here enveloping Rev., which begins [1.16] with the same picture--actually, a sort of cannon: the sword is propelled out of his mouth)....When yesterday I adduced this passage, somebody objected to the military tone (in spite of the fact that Rev. extends Jesus' own metaphor: "I have come to bring...a sword" [Mt.10.34]).

3 Thus far I've dealt with this Thinksheet's first line. Now notice the second line, which contains three ambiguities (violations of univocality). (1) "Language": In the earliest distinction in modern linguistics, is this *la langue* (language as the thing itself) or *le parole* (the use of the thing, viz. speaking/writing)? (2) "Power": God's power? Ours (i.e. rhetoric)? The force of the words themselves? (3) "Faithfulness": To God? To language (the honest use of)? To a particular linguistic tradition? To a particular literature, e.g. the Bible?....With all this muddiness, lexical flab, no wonder Loree said of this proposed title (when I told her of it after the planning meeting yesterday) "It doesn't grab me."

4 A further reason for the title's ineptness: It can be read either with or without tension, depending on one's intention....WITHOUT: Billy Graham & the Promise Keepers are prize examples of "Language as power [to change people] & faithfulness [to the biblical-canonical-classical Christian way of speech]." On NPR, I heard a wife say "I sent my frog to the rally & he came back a prince." That's power (alongside Billy's millions of lifetime converts). And you'll hear, in Graham crusades & P.K. rallies, no suppressive revisionism of the Bible's way of speaking about God. That's faithfulness....But the phrase, in the colloquies context, is inhouse academic code meaning WITH tension between (personal-&-social transformative) power & faithfulness (to the traditional Christian way of speech, bowdlerized so as to give no unnecessary offense, no avoidable impedence to "evangelism")....**Irony**: The bowdlerizing (world-conformative) spirit achieves the reverse of its intention: less power, not more. Free-flowing, without ideological screening, the Bible language for God has proved its power throughout Christian history, & will continue so to do.

5 To give pertinence & parameters to the colloquy theme, each year we append four **questions**. As one of the two consultants to the colloquies planning committee, I suggested yesterday that each member draft four questions, four of them to be selected for publicity & to give direction to paper-writers, speakers, & small-group leaders. I hope, too, that this will rescue & redeem the theme-wording from its muddiness & academic smell. My four offerings: (1) In speaking of God, what is Christianity's irreducible lexicon (word-stock)? (2) Are the Bible's pronouns for God in that essential word-stock? (3) In Christian speech-formation, which should be the base: personal experience? Scripture? common ("worldly") experience? covenantal ("churchly") experience? tradition? Weight each by setting in priority order. (4) What criteria are appropriate for judging the pertinence/power of a particular allegedly Christian way of speaking/writing?

6 Yesterday in the planning meeting, someone tried to sidestep the language-for-God issue by saying "Inclusive language is no longer an issue among us." True hori-

zontally, false vertically. Horizontally (in avoiding generic-masculine pronouns), we the planning committee are as is the New Revised Standard Version; but we are split vertically: only some of us (including me) practice the full biblical language for God (including the [masculine] pronouns), as does the NRSV. If we are to have a colloquy on the Christian way of speech (the audio-parallel to the Christian way of life, of nonverbal behavior), we cannot honorably sidestep, avoid, conceal this split, which produces adversary responses to such questions as in §5 & as these: (1) Face to face with this split, how shall we speak of "power" (which speech-manner is, now/potentially, more powerful)? (2)...."faithfulness" (which speech-manner is more faithful to the gospel & therefore to God)? What about "faithful to the Bible's way of speaking of God"? That is not a question: Suppressing/tabooing the Bible's pronouns for God is being specifically, calculatingly, unfaithful to the Bible's way of speaking of God (in the alleged interest of a higher faithfulness). All of us in the UCC would rather be inclusive, tolerant, diversity-loving--so I loathe calling some of you (as I must) unfaithful to the Bible (the Word written, though I understand your claim that your shrunk Scripture is more faithful to the Word incarnate).

7 Without due consideration for the hermeneutical & theological consequences, & under gender-feminist pressure, some have **depronominialized** (as a part-of-speech demasculinizing of) the biblical deity (compare the unthoughtout-consequences of "Renaming scripture [by dumping "Old Testament"]": 965-6 CHRISTIAN CENTURY 10. 29.97). The UCC would be ahead of the curve if we could powerfully affirm masculine God-talk-----as in the Bible's last book, which is full of "Old Testament" references & allusions (such as, for 19.16 ["King of kings and Lord of Lords"], Ezra 7.12; Ps.24.10, where "the King of glory" is twice emphatically "HE"--a fact appearing in only one of 26 Eng. versions/translations, viz. the Jerusalem Bible: note the Hebrew masculine emphasis: "Who is this king of glory? HE is Yahweh Sabaoth, King of glory, HE!"--capitalization of "he," mine; but note JB's use of lower case "king" before the LORD is identified as this "King")....Redesigning the deity, in the interest of gender feminism, wrecks (1) the Bible's integrity & (2) Bible study & preaching. It compounds unfaithfulness & impotence, double reverse of the proposed colloquy theme.

LLIOTT THINKSHEETS  
309 Lake Elizabeth Drive  
Craigville MA 02632

