

Of course the outs hate privilege and the ins love it, but that's not its only ambiguity. It's variously a dis/value, both; an evil/good, both. Beyond the two immediately previous Thinksheets, I want to spell this out both (1) as a corrective to my tendency, this past ½ c., to badmouth privilege as an aspect of my identifying with the unprivileged against the privileged (my "prophetic" stance, ever at odds with my worldly comforts and openings), and (2) as preparation for a more balanced, less subjective-emotive-rhetorical dealing with situations and issues involving privilege (mine and others'). I hope you'll find these ruminations enriching, or at least cautionary.

1. The Bible's Big Boys & Girls were privileged (Hebrew, "blessed") by nature and/or nurture and/or election (divine choice & preparation for mission). Not that ~~they~~ they're all perfect models of the common-good use of one's privileges. More than one of them said, variously, "Please, God, can't you choose somebody else?" An orator, Jonah, abused his privileged gift by going west to avoid preaching in the east, viz Ninevah. Paul concluded that getting Christians incarcerated & killed was not a proper use of his privileges. We humans imperfectly perceive and use our privileges; that's two ambiguities about them. And here's something unambiguous: We can help one another improve our perceiving and using of our "gifts" (one of a handful of Biblical words for privilege). As God's chosen-privileged people sent to be "a light to the nations," we can at least be a little better light to each other.

2. Both are occluding, blinding: privilege & unprivilege. To put it positively, the ins & outs can each see better than the other. Paul's lower-classes Corinthians ("few of you were wise or powerful or of high social standing," 1.1.26), viewing from below, could see some things Paul couldn't--more important, could feel some things Paul could feel only indirectly, by listening to them if he thought it worth taking the time for (did he?). Again, the women among these lower classes could see some things their men couldn't, both because they were women (and women, by nature & grace, can see some things better than men can) and because Hellenistic society (both pagan & Jewish) accorded females an inferior status, which meant viewing from even farther below than were their men. Instead of expecting Paul to be a paragon of righteous seeing & behaving (what a freak he'd've come across as had he been!), we should thank God that his vision was in advance of his provisions for churchly decency & order--the former (as in Gal.3.27f), unambiguous; the latter (as in some of 1Cor.7 & 11), ambiguous....And Paul vis-a-vis privilege? Way up there. Wise, trilingual, of considerable influence in at least one ethnic community, of a Roman-citizen family, male (and of course Jewish and free).

3. Privilege can "empty itself" of ego values while fulfilling itself for the common good. Paul sees Jesus, the Cosmic Christ, as choosing this self-emptying (Greek "kenosis," in a verbal form in Phil.2.7, "of his own free will he gave up all he had"), modeling the same for Paul. After his conversion, Paul no longer much moved in his old social circles --so their sanctions on him were weak and he seems not to have suffered from loss of face among them because of his associating with gentiles, slaves, & women. The Church as the new divine society of the future in the present cut across the whole of humanity with all its divisions, and one became more conscious of being in the new social order as one (1) lost status in the old orders (if one had any!) and (2) found new status in the new social order. In our century, esp. in Am., sociologists of religion have documented and explicated this dual psychosocial phenomenon, which (to my knowledge) has been underexploited by students of preference-prejudice-privilege.

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4. For the NT, all preChristian privileges have become "dung" or "garbage" (Phil.3.8) by the expulsive power of the New Privilege (vv.8f: "that I may gain Christ and be completely united with him....the righteousness that comes from God and is based on faith....in the hope that I myself will be raised from death to life"). (Earlier in the chapter, Paul catalogs his now worthless rights, privileges, credits.) Christian baptism levels and is the context for denying that there's any longer any advantage-privilege, "in Christ," in being Jewish, free, and male-- "for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal.3.27f; cf. Col.3.10f; Ro.6.3f; 1Cor.12.13).

5. On sex, everybody now and then goes more or less bananas--most recently, the Pope against Chas. Curran (Aug/86). I can't resist illuminating you on this in Gal.3.28: Paul's connecting particle (no MSS differences here) between male/female is "and," whereas "or" is the c.p. in his other two distinctions (Jew/Greek, slave/free). Why? Recently some feminists have projected from his (supposed) qt. of Gn.1.27 (which has "and") that Paul believed in an "in Christ" spiritual androgyny or sexual transcendence more profound--intimate than lesser earthly distinctions, ethnic (Jew/Greek) and classistic (slave/free). Could be, esp. with Jesus' no marrying / giving in marriage, in heaven (though I've not seen this connection in this ref. in feminist writing). But I go with a great Gal. commentary (1896!) in my library, Lightfoot: "Every barrier is swept away. No special claims, no special disabilities. The conventional distinctions of religious caste or of social rank, even the natural distinction of sex, are banished hence. One heart beats in all; one mind guides all: one life is lived by all." "Not the fact only (of distinctions), but the possibility" is rejected. Perhaps, when Paul gets to sex, he shifts from "or" to "and" "because the distinction now mentioned is different in kind, no longer social but physical." If there's an allusion to Gn.1.27, which has "and," it's a "climax": "even the primal distinction of sex has ceased. Cp.Col.3.11." L. goes on to ref. to the Gospel of the Egyptians, which here considerably exercised the Church Fathers: A woman asks Jesus when the Kingdom is to come, and he responds "When the 2 shall be 1, and the male with the female, neither male nor female."....Now have a look at the Eng.trs.: Till 1881 (ERV), all follow not the Greek ("and") but the Latin ("or"). Unfortunately, most of the post-1881 Eng.trs. backslide into "or"--eg, Moffatt ("there is no room for"), NAB ("there does not exist among you") --both of them have "or" all three times, as do Living & NIV. But some control the "or" of the 1st 2 distinctions by the "and" in the 3rd distinction: AT ("there is no room for"), JB ("there are no more distinctions between"), NEB ("there is no such thing as"), Phillips ("gone is the distinction between"), & Amplified (which has fn. "Literal translation"). NASB has "male nor female," but fn. "Literally, 'and'")....IN-ARGUABLE CONCLUSION: For whatever reason(s), Paul is singling out the man/woman distinction from the others: sex is a unique, and uniquely profound-essential, human distinction, the most important human one, yet transcended "in Christ." Christian feminism must include this context and sense of privilege/ambiguity/meaning/mystery....If one prays the ancient prayer "Lord, I thank you that you did not create me a gentile, or a slave, or a woman (the very same order as Gal.3.28!)," one must remind oneself that these and other privileges are to be in the service of, not at the expense of, the (distributively) unprivileged. And one must pray for and work toward such social changes as will be more equitable, more favorable to truly human life. As for the this-worldly, first-creational parallel privileges of the sexes, we must live with ambiguity no matter how much clarity we achieve: illumined by the light of love, we are nevertheless in darkness over our depth, praying for the grace to be to each other more good news than bad.