

What you see is from where you stand.--

a typically monosyllabic, obvious, & profoundly true saying of Billy Sunday,
almost-a-century-ago ex-baseball-player hellfire American evangelist

1 Must I explain who B.S. was? Yes, & before long readers will have to be informed who that other Billy evangelist, B.G., was. We still have things to learn from both of them.

2 The white-bearded rabbis who examined me in connection with a U. of Chicago doctorate handed me an unpointed (vowel-less!) Hebrew Bible & asked me to (1) read aloud & (2) translate passages in Torah, Nevi'im, & Kethuvim (the three sections of what we Christians call, & should continue to call, the Old Testament). They expected me so to have lived in the sacred text that I could "hear" it (two senses) by looking only at its consonants. Then they pounced on a number of nouns & asked me to trace their semantic changes through successive periods of Hebrew-Israelite-Jewish life....That is this Thinksheet's title's first message: we biblical believers are to live in the Bible. As daily as we live in our places of residence. In our places of residence, we absorb the house-speech: live in the Bible & we learn Bible-speech (ideally in the languages of the Bible, but at least in the language [singular] of the Bible).

Why live in Bible-speech? So we can live in Bible-mind (the mentality of those through whom the Word of God came in, with, & under their words). And if we are to understand Bible-mind, we must imagine ourselves into Bible-world, out from which we can live into our world, in a dialectic whose covenantal base is the Bible.

3 **Imagine.** When she was three, Doris Kearns Goodwin visited the ancestral home of FDR, whose story (along with those of other presidents) she would tell when she became a Harv. U. historian. In her WAIT TILL NEXT YEAR (S&S/97), she recalls the incident in tandem with the baseball stories her father had told & the baseball games she retold her father as he came home from work day by day (as daily also she posted the day's game's data on the butchershop window). In her mature mind, the memory of FDR's cigarette holder & the leash of his dog Fala came together with her baseball-memory skills: "I realized...I could play an inner game with history just as I did with baseball. If I closed my eyes I could visualize Roosevelt in his room with Fala, just as, when I listened to the stories my father told, I could see the great players of the past...unleash their majestic swings [my underlining]."

The "inner game" of living in the Bible requires a respect for, & both knowledge & use of, the language of the Bible. That's three essentials of faithful (faith-ful & honest) biblical interpretation (hermeneutics).

4 Living "out from" the Bible means more than merely letting the Bible speak to our life-world, our particular present cultural surround. It means also letting the Bible take its chances with the cultic competition of its own time, our time, & the time between the times. To the extent of our present-day knowledge, which is both vast & small, we should use all relevant disciplines (psycho-, socio-, anthro-, historico-, religio-, etc.) to illumine our coming out from the Bible with words we believe most appropriate here & now (exposition, based on exegesis).

5 One of those disciplines is comparative religion (or history of religion). But there is no mind of the Church on this:

(1) Some believe that special pleading is appropriate. The Bible, they say, is the unique witness to the Faith, which is incomparable with "the religions." I did not say the other religions, for these provincial thinkers deny that the Faith is a religion. Inside the Church, the denial is implicit in the Gospel claim of uniqueness (i.e., incomparability): to outsiders, it's an unfair, insular, ludicrous, dishonest, rhetorical ploy.

(2) And some inside, including me, agree with those outside. Particularly for this Thinksheet, we believe that **comparative-religion categories** are appropriate to biblical interpretation, theological understanding, & proclamation. And not only appropriate: essential to understanding the Light amid the lights.

6 **Occasion** of this Thinksheet: I've just returned from a theological colloquium in which my position, "(2)," was brushed aside in favor of a parochial doctrine of God, & (ironically!) Bible-speech for God was reduced in response to a current cultural demand for a gender-neutral deity--an instance of a paradoxical universal in support of a parochialism. The colloquium was into other important matters, so I made no effort to expound my view of the liberal doctrine-of-God situation--an exposition I'll undertake for the remainder of this page....The reduction I refer to is the suppression (in Bible, tradition, &/or speech/writing) of the Bible's (masculine) pronouns for God.

7 First I note the odd anti-liberal (though female-liberationist) character of this move to redesign the deity. We can all understand Protestant-fundamentalist dislike of comparative religion; but here the dislike is in the minds of some self-styled liberals, liberal evangelicals, & evangelical ecumenicals (the last doubly odd, for the pronouns-for-God suppression is anti-ecumenical).

8 Please refer again to this Thinksheet's title. I'm not talking metaphysics, ontology, the "reality" of God-in-himself (not to say "God-in-self" or "God-in-God's-self"). I'm talking Bible. God in Bible. God-in-Bible lived out from Bible. It is an error of logic, history, language, & devotion to confuse that God, the biblical-canonical God, with (Pascal) "the God of the philosophers" or theologians, or the God of movements (the black God, the feminist God, the God with "a preferential option for the poor," et al). Neither the fear of offending devotees of movement deities, nor the desire to "communicate" with those devotees, justify linguistic revisionism against Bible-speech for the Bible's God.

9 The (Christian) Faith is in the comparative-religion category religion: it is a **religion**, to be studied alongside all other religions even though it is for us Christians religion itself, the true & ultimate religion which we are to live & witness to (though its own nature forbids our imposing it on anyone). First subcategory, it is a theic religion, a deity-worshiping religion (as, e.g., Buddhism is not [though pop-Buddhism is]). Second subcategory, it is a monotheistic religion, excluding (even from reality) deities other than its own "only" God. Third subcategory, its deity is masculine ("god"), excluding feminine ("goddess"). Fourth subcategory, its deity is transcendent & immanent, excluding immanent rivals ("idols," "creatures") & rejecting captivity to analogies (e.g., sex & [some even say, though not I] person).

10 Two popular recent books remind us of "the history of God," i.e., that the God-idea developed in the give-&-take of contending "reach[es] of spirit"(the second phrase of my FLOW OF FLESH,...). The most serious contenders were goddesses, who were forever sucking the biblical community down into the soil of nature (as in procreation & primary nurture the mother is visibly closer to earth than is the father, who's at a distance defined by the fact that his biological maturation does not depend on his part in procreation--the distance which protects the [masculine] deity from collapsing into nature, with consequent loss of covenant history & hope). ...Confirmation: The present return of the goddess(es) is tightly bound with nature-worship....Surrendering the universal biblical-historical practice of masculine pronouns for God opens the door to nature worship & New Age. After the surrender, many say "he or she" when needing a pronoun for the deity--& some of them go on to use "she" alternately or even exclusively. Slippery slope!

11 "Heaven impregnates earth" is a c.-r. category: the Sky Father (Skr. "dyaus [Gk. "Zeus"] pitra," "Our Father in heaven") fructifies the Earth Mother (Lat. "magna mater," the Great Mother, the Goddess). In the Bible, "heaven" is male only twice, viz. Gn.6 (earth's attraction being beautiful women) & Jesus' "virgin birth" (Mt.1.18, L.1.35--"the Holy Spirit" in the male role,* as in other traditions Zeus, Krishna, et al). *At least in the story*, God's male role is undeniable except by Christians who dissemble by the ploy of parochial special pleading. Elsewhere, the biblical deity is not male but masculine....All this is revealed, sacred God-talk, not God-being: the Cappadocian Fathers rightly said that God's being, οὐσία *ousia*, is beyond the grasp of our creaturely minds. But how God wants to be spoken of, viz. masculinely, is a matter of revelation; & to dissemble about it is to be unfaithful to revelation.