

This thinksheet continues my attack on NCC's INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE LECTIONARY--its conception, its product, even its existence. These past three days at Craigville I've heard three lectures of one of its promoters and creators, viz., Burton Throckmorton, who is a sensitive human being, a devout Christian, and an eminent NT scholar, whom I publicly praised and thanked for being right-hearted on inclusive language (as I am), and publicly rebuked for being wrong-headed on "I.L.L." The thinksheet is nothing personal: I would level the same charges against any and all members of the I.L.L. Committee. But Burt has been in range these past three days, so I center on him this attack.

QUESTIONABLE ASSUMPTION #1: A full-text lectionary will not displace the Bible in public worship. History stands against this assumption. In a huge RCC church in Brooklyn (in which I was the first Protestant to perform a wedding), I asked the priest, F.Kelly, for a Bible. Response: "We wouldn't have a Bible." I: "Not even in the church library?" He: "No, we use onlythe lectionary." I: "But don't you use the Bible in private study and devotion?" He: "No need! All the great texts are handy in the lectionary." All God's chillun are lazy, looking for shortcuts and time-savers; no reason to think Protestant clergy will behave differently, here, from RC clergy.... The fear of this was one reason the UCC Synod voted against distributing I.L.L. to our clergy, but two months later the UCC Stewardship Council did just that. Roger Shinn complained (12Feb83, address to the UCC Conference Ministers); and when I complained to UCC Pres. A.Post he said "Willis, that one got away from us. Sorry!" Any full-text lectionary is something for our Bible-ignorant denomination and churches to fear, not to promote. This objection has nothing to do with the inclusive-language issue. The Bible-in-the-hands-of-the-people was a Reformation cry; now, in some of our churches, the Bible will not even be in the hands of the worship-leader!

QUESTIONABLE ASSUMPTION #2: Single-issue revisionism, in this case sexism, can be justified if pressures inside and outside the churches force it.

A number of times I've taught a course titled something like "Racism, Sexism, Classism, and Nationism in the Bible" and have said "The Bible would be torn to shreds if we were foolish enough to remove from it all its isms! We should become free in, with, through, and from the Bible--but should not dishonor it with Communist-like revisionisms such as Moscow-watchers discover in each new edition of the U.S.S.R. ENCYCLOPEDIA." BT admitted that I.L.L. is a single-issue pressures-product. I don't know what he thinks of single-issue politics, but he's probably as much against it as I am against both it and single-issue revisionism of sacred texts. Today, an antisexist lectionary; tomorrow, what?

QUESTIONABLE ASSUMPTION #3: A single-issue lectionary will not demote the Bible to second-class status among sacred texts. BT talked about "getting used to" such unfamiliar I.L.L. expressions as "the Human One" and "Sovereign." Suppose folks take the I.L.L. seriously enough to get used to these barbarisms: the traditional expressions in our language (not just in our Bible!)--like "the Son of Man" and "Lord"--will become less and less familiar and will feel like barbarisms. Then, partly to fight against the demotion of the Bible itself, pressure will build up to use the I.L.L. expressions in revising RSV, thus making the whole text of Scripture single-issue and winding us up with two RSVs (as few Protestants would go along with this radical revisionism, and the RCC as well as the Orthodox churches would condemn the bastardized edition of RSV). This leads to #4:

QUESTIONABLE ASSUMPTION #4: This single issue is sufficiently weighty to justify suffering a fresh schism in the Christian Ecumene. Single-issue fanatics, whatever the issue, say "Our cause is just, and we don't mind whatever price must be paid to push it." I am pro-inclusive-language, and have been for decades; and for many years desexized the hymns sung at N.Y. Theological Seminary commencements. But I am no fanatic: fanatics butcher the Bible for this cause, and don't give a damn about the cost to world Christian unity, the local ecumene, or anything in between. But I hope the I.L.L., instead of having this serious consequence, will turn out to be nothing but a bad and embarrassing joke, which it already is in many circles.

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QUESTIONABLE ASSUMPTION #5: God is for male/female equality, and the church has been slower than the world to get the message and shape its message (and liturgical scriptures) to this message. "Accommodation" is necessary both transculturally and transtemporally, but "accommodationism" is a sell-out to Zeitgeist (the going cultural spirit), to the past (as NT "Judaizers," slipping back into Judaism), or to a particular cultural or subcultural strand (as NT-and-later "gnosticizers"). The I.L.L. is an instance of accommodationISM. Accepting uncritically a democratic-political idea-goal (developed out of the Enlightenment, not the Reformation or the Bible before it), it eisegeses the secular-horizontal notion of male/female equality into the Mind of God; then, after this 90° switch to the vertical, reads the notion (as a religious sanction for the notion) out of the Mind of God (a rabbit pulled out of the Big Hat). Shabby exegesis, worse theology. It's a dimensional fallacy to apply to the horizontal (i.e., to economic-social-political realities) the NT's "in-Christ" male/female equality (Gal.3.27f isn't concerned with horizontal equality between Jews and Gentiles, or slaves and free, or men and women--who, it says, are *vertically* equal, as is implicit in Gn.1.26ff). Facile extrapolations-inferences from vertical to horizontal (and vice versa) are unworthy of scholars, who are nonetheless tempted to them to satisfy the cravings (needs?) of their constituents; and I.L.L. is one result of such pandering. In liberationist parlance, "equality" is a holophrase for justice and a code word for "opening our society to women" (i.e., effecting such legal and cultural changes as will free women for all the rights and duties of men).

QUESTIONABLE ASSUMPTION #6: God is against male superiority even though the Bible is full of it. Obviously, God is against male superiority in tigers: the female tiger is superior both in strength and in complexity of responsibilities. In our species, the reverse is true, at least in regard to physical strength. If "equality" was intended, why didn't God make women and men equal in physical strength so that neither could dominate the other? I believe in male superiority, but I believe also in female superiority (my wonderful wife Loree being, in many ways, superior to me): the doctrine of "the mutual superiority of the sexes" is supported by nature and history, and "equality" is supported by neither--but is an implicit assumption of I.L.L. More to the immediate point, "the mutual superiority of the sexes" requires no fancy inferential leap from Scripture, which also teaches us to "in honor prefer one another."

QUESTIONABLE ASSUMPTION #7: The biblical god is not masculine. CONTRA-FACT: In the whole history of religion, Mithras is the only god more masculine than the biblical god! In fact, the biblical god is so masculine he's even gynophobic (i.e., fearing, and warning his people against, goddesses). We should teach people that the Bible (like all other sacred literature of all the world's religions) is culture-specific, as "the God beyond God" is not. Japanese religions are started by women, the biblical religions by men (though Sun Moon says the Messiah must be a couple, not a man--not Jesus, but SM and Ms.Moon--which is obviously better than Christianity, right?).

QUESTIONABLE ASSUMPTION #8: It's fair, and scholarly, to address sexism within the limited context of Westernism and the Bible. When privately I confronted BT with this shrunken contextualism, he said "But we can't come to solid conclusions about the global level--the nature of language in general, and of humanity." I translate this as that we can't apply prophetic force against global facts as we can against provincial facts. That's fair? scholarly? With virtually no exception, human speech is "sexist": maybe the species can be taught to talk different, but it's too long-term a project to interest those who want change NOW. In the wider context, though, it may be nonsense to try to change OUR language if language ITSELF tilts toward the masculine (and is, many anthropologists aver, primarily a masculine product). Further, how unfair it is to the Bible to thump it as sexist when it's one of the least sexist of the world's sacred texts! (What do? I suggest in #1843.) I'm for manageable changes toward increased fairness and (as I believe Paul was) for functional equality of men and women in organizations under our control as Christians, but I'm against Canute-like efforts to force human language and humanity to conform to the Procrustean notion of "equality." (And I'm strong for the civil rights of all human beings.)