CONTINUITY OR COMMUNICATION? The case of the Christian audio ID, **JESUS IS LORD**

#2181 *23 Sept 87*
ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS
309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone 617.775.8008
Noncommercial reproduction permitted

While the cross is the Christian's video ID (identification by SIGHT), it only became that several generations after our Faith's earliest days; our audio ID (identification by SOUND) is "apostolic" (ie, traceable to the first generation & thus having the greater sanction of antiquity): it was & is "KYRIOS IESOUS," "Jesus is Lord." The situation this Thinksheet confronts is that some want to call themselves Christians today but refuse to call Jesus Lord: are they to be permitted, or excluded? (For a useful historical parallel, cf., in the Donatist controversy, respectively, the latitudinarians & the rigorists.)

1. Society-defining terms, sometimes called "family language," function as walls (for community selfconsciousness & protection both from pollution & from amnesia) & as bridges (for intracommunal communication & for relations with other societies--both societal & personal relations). I thought of this while sitting on a hill above Toledo (Spain, that is, not Ohio), that wondrous city of walls & bridges, three of the latter going all the way back to their Roman engineers. I sought to sit as close as possible to the spot where ElGreco had painted his magical-mystical "View of Toledo" (I then went to sit, for further meditation, in the room where, in his home in the city, he had finished the painting). I respect, & thank God for, all walls & bridges that say yes to the truly human & thus yes to God.

2. So we come to the question in this Thinksheet's title. The dilemma can be simply stated: A community dies if it fails, for just one generation, to communicate, audiovisually, with its offspring & its surround: but if in its efforts to communicate it sacrifices essentials of its signal system (words that are diachronic life-blood carrying its basic images, ideas, rituals, promises, preachments), it dies from amnesia (a death powerfully presented in Russell Hoban's RIDDLEY WALKER: pilgrims continue their annual trip to Canterbury even though none can remember any words that explain why). To stay with my metaphor: The first death is from an excess of walls & a defect of bridges, the second death is from an excess of bridges & a defect of walls....So in the title I've posed an unreal question. The question is not "continuity or communication," which? Rather it is this: The question is two-sided: (1) What is our maximum language-freedom in seeking to communicate-&-reinforce the kerygma (the gospel message) here & now (in each encounter within & outside the Christian community)? (2) What is the irreducible minimum of words for the Christian lexicon, vocabulary? **I've preached in Unitarian churches whose answers would be (1) "unlimited" & (2) "nothing," & in fundamentalist churches whose answers would be (1) "no freedom to deviate from the Bible" & (2) "all the words of the Bible." My Christian dictionary is small, & this Thinksheet concentrates on just one word, but I want to mention three: (1) "Jesus," (2) Jesus' main way of referring to God ("Father"), and (3) the Church's main way of referring to Jesus ("Lord").**

3. Since "Lord" is the Church's main way of referring to Jesus, it's logical that everywhere & always the confession "Jesus is Lord" has been required of candidates for baptism & church membership. (1Cor.12. 3 says the confessor, in making this confession, is "guided by the Holy Spirit.") Eg, my own church-communion-denomination, the UCC, so requires: (1) BOOK OF WORSHIP, p.149, "Lord" required for baptism; (2) BOOK OF WORSHIP, p.161, "Lord" required in reception of members. The question in each ritual (there being no alternatives) is this: "Do you profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?" The word is so central to faith & fellowship that to drop it would be catastrophic: (1) We would be cutting ourselves off from the Church through the ages & around the

ORDER

world; (2) We would be depriving our children of a bridge to the Christian past & alienating them from the Book that in both Testaments is "Lord"-ful; (3) We would be denying them the main verbal bridge to the other Christians now in the world, & an important verbal bridge to the Jews now in the world; (4) We would be clouding our children's understanding of our Faith's vision for the future; (5) We would have impoverished christology, for "Lord" is the Bible's bridge between God in the Old Testament & Jesus in the New (and thus it would lead to theologians in other churches asking whether the UCC is serious about theology). Whatever communication reasons might be adduced for dropping "Lord," the argumentation could not outweigh the loss of continuity both diachronic (the Christian past-present-future) & synchronic (with our Christian contemporaries in other churches--where continuity & communication are one bridge). To return to my metaphor: This multiple catastrophe would be the replacing of bridges with walls, or a massive multiple bridge-burning. Indeed, would we still remain a church, or would we have converted ourselves into a paraChristian cult?

4. Our original UCC Statement of Faith, & (BOOK OF WORSHIP, p.513) Robt. Moss' second-person version of it, both have Jesus as "Lord," as does implicitly our Statement of Mission (adopted by the Exec. Council prior to the '87 Synod: "affirming our Statement of Faith").

5. But at Synod '87, a "Lord"-less Statement of Faith was adopted. It will prove to be a calamity (no matter what merits it may have) not only for the reasons I've listed in sec.3 (above) but also because of its being one more wedge splitting our church left & right (both senses).

6. Compromise Statements of Faith could move us beyond the present tragic situation. My #2178 is an effort in that direction.

7. The UCC's strength is its human sensitivity ("oppression," "liberation," "caring," etc.), on which it commits hubris: hypersensitivity is our weakness. Out with anything anybody feels to be "oppressive," so out with "Lord." (I feel oppressed by the dumping of "Lord": is that enough to get it back in?) Adding to this weakness is an antitheological tendency in some UCCers. On the occasion when the Exec. Council voted "Lord" out (a clergyman member told me), voices to keep it in were squelched by a laywoman member's saying, "We don't have time for theology here." To which the clergyman says he replied, "Then what are we doing here?" But to no avail: The Council referred the crippled Statement of Faith (crippled also in some other ways) to Synod, which adopted it.

8. Let a great scholar witness the essentiality of "Lord." In a brilliant, ten-p. article on "Christology in the NT" (IDB Sup.Vol., Abingdon/76), Willi Marxsen concludes that the kerygma must be "formulated in the language of our time,...communicating the same attitude with the help of our own language and ideas." But so far is he from dumping "Lord" that he ends thus: "We can confess Jesus as Lord only when we understand what we mean and make it understandable for others. Indeed, we truly confess Jesus as Lord only if we are ready to risk our necks for this confession."

9. "Lord" is the only English word able to simulate the word-bridge in the earliest Christian Bible (which was in Greek only, the OT translated from Hebrew & Aramaic)--KYRIOS--intimately relating the personal name for the divine in the OT (viz, YHWH, Yahweh) with the personal name for the divine in the NT (viz, Jesus). Greek Christians today have it easy, as do Jews: both learn the original sounds of their faith. (Pp.122f of Reform Judaism's GATES OF PRAYER translates God's name 15 times: "God" once, "Adonai" (Hebrew for "Lord") 4 times, &, 5 times each, "the Eternal" & "the Lord.")