

are any words *ESSENTIAL* to "the Word"?

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A few stories apropos this essential Christian-communication question:

1 Lectors at our church are to study my "Instructions for Lector" (herewith), then meet with me for practice. Saturday at practice, the lector-to-be said, "Why, in section 17, am I to say 'Let us listen *for* the Word of God': wouldn't '*to*' be better English?" I: "Only if you'd be satisfied with the congregation's listening to the Bible." He: "Well, what else would they be doing?" I: "Listening for what God the Word has to say to each, to all, *through* the Bible as you read it (& thus also through you)." A devout believer, he immediately grasped (1) that something was more important than the words of the Bible, (2) that the Bible's words were more important than he'd thought, but in a different way, & (3) that being lector was an awesome responsibility & opportunity.... "The Word" has many facets. It's all God's efforts to communicate to humanity his will & way, his love & life. It's Torah, teaching, revelation. In the incarnation, the Word is Jesus (John 1). It's the consonant work of the Holy Spirit in church-Scripture-reader-hearer.

In this light, two perspectives are ruled out: (1) Literalism, which says that when we're reading/hearing the Bible we are in direct contact with the Word of God ("The Bible is the Word of God."). This I call scribism, or bibliolatry (Bible worship); & it logically supports an indefensible dogma, viz, that the Bible is errorless (inerrant, infallible); (2) Spiritualism, the teaching that (in its ultimate form) none of the Bible's words are essential; we are to catch the spirit & not get too serious about the letter, which easily is enemy of the spirit.

2 Constance Seddon (long a member, with Loree & me, of a NY Saturday group, Breakfast for the Hungry Hearted), tells (in her article "On Becoming Holy," May/96 LUTHERAN FORUM) of being asked for an interview toward a book on "spirituality and children." When the book came out, she was shocked "that the book had nothing to do with the religious lives of children. Instead, it was an attempt to translate religious language in a way that would make it 'understandable' to contemporary parents; 'religion' was something to be overcome, and its institutions stood *in the way of* spirituality. Spirituality was the sense of wonder that our children *teach us*.".... In this story, not only are there no essential words: words themselves are unnecessary except as they may lead to the nonverbal experience of "wonder." And of course the church is unnecessary. And the Christian Faith. And God. Connie attended a meeting at which the author laid the above on the audience, an "enthusiastic audience of mostly young mothers...in full agreement." Think of the the rank, tangled growth in the semantic jungle of their minds: New Age, superstition (which is what "wonder" entails in the consciousness of archeo- & neo-primitives), postmodernism, public-school ignorance of religion, absence (or abandonment) of the praxis of religion, defense reaction against cultic competition in our electronic culture.

3 Third story: Sunday, in a group I'm responsible for leading, I asked the question which is this Thinksheet's title. Some thought the name of Jesus was not essential to Christian prayers & should be dispensed with in case any were present who might be expected to be offended by that name. I believe, & stated, that with the exception of the Lord's Prayer, Christian prayers wherever (private, family, church, church school, public) should be, openly/orally, *in Namen Jesu*, in Jesus' name. A distinguished retired UCC clergyman asked, "Am I betraying the Lord when I do not do so, out of regard for nonChristians present?" I said "Yes," though it was painful for me to do so--to cross him, whom I admire & love.

4 An eminent homiletician & church musician of the UCC, after preaching Sunday in the Craigville Tabernacle, said (in the Talk-Back following the service), when I asked the question which is this Thinksheet's title, that "Father, Son, & Holy Spirit" are essential to the Christian language but Christianity's pronouns for God (all masculine) are not--I immediately voicing disagreement on the latter. Further, he said that given "Father, Son, & Holy Spirit," we should be free to expand the God-language in the interest of enrichment & communication--on which I immediately voiced agreement, saying "The center should be firm & the circumference porous."

Said he, "If I were to say 'God...he...he...he...', I'd never see the women again." I rejoined that losing such women would be "a necessary loss" (referring +

to a recent great book-title, NECESSARY LOSSES). Christianity (in contrast to its earlier competitor Mithraism & its later competitor Islam, both more attractive to men) has always been more attractive to women than to men, & the continuing use of Christianity's pronouns for God does not threaten to cut this predominance in our religion. Two ironic animadversions to his God-pronouns suppression:

(1) In the discussion, he mentioned that "Mormon churches are everywhere around my church, it seems on every other corner." Classical Christianity has never taught, as the Mormons do, that God is (physically!) male: not just pronouns, but the works. Yet women flock to their churches. Masculine pronouns for God? No problem. (Even God a male? No problem!)

(2) Gender feminism, always a higher-education fad, is fast fading as feminism loses its political-economic edge & dulls down into "the culture of celebrity and [narcissistic] self-obsession" (Ginia Bellafante, 6.29.98 TIME cover-story, 56). P58: "Much of feminism has evolved into the silly [underlining, mine]." To eliminate one of the parts of speech in speaking of deity has always been, linguistically (ie, in light of the nature & history of language), a silly idea. More serious: For Christians, it's a blasphemous squelching of one dimension of how God wants us to speak of him.

5 An eminent rabbi, sitting on a couch with me in his livingroom, said, "Too bad the New Testament was ever written. It wasn't necessary." I burst out laughing, & he chuckled. We love each other & could celebrate the humorousness of the situation while recognizing that his remark was, from the Jewish viewpoint, a plain statement of fact....as plain as if he & I were to say together, "The Qur'an is unnecessary." Most of the words essential to his honoring "the Word" are essential also to my doing so: we are brothers. The words distinctive-essential to my honoring "the Word" as a Christian are to him not only unnecessary but also blasphemous: we are contra-witnesses (but, by God's grace on us both, not enemies).

When he witnesses to me & fails to honor God come in the flesh as Jesus, he blasphemes (in my view): when I do so honor, I blaspheme (in his view). We differ on what is, positively/negatively, essential to communicating "the Word." But the call to love transcends the difference. (Thus "Mutual blasphemers, love one another!"---chap.10 of my FLOW OF FLESH, REACH OF SPIRIT [Eerdmans/95].)

Behind this Thinksheet's title-question lies the present-cultural **denial** (shockingly revealed in our second story, §2) that any particular words are essential to communicating "the Word" (or, in the case of that story, "spirituality"). The so-called cultural elite (in higher education & the media) are word-chary when it comes to religion, & word-suppressive when it comes to the Christian religion. (Roy Rogers has been much in the news since his death two days ago. He was outstanding among Hollywoodians for his forthright Christian-Protestant-evangelical witness, but not once [in print, on radio or television] have I seen/heard any of those words used of him [though one commentator conceded that he was "religious"].)

Our third story, §3, was about suppressing the name of Jesus.

Our fourth story, §4, was about suppressing Christianity's pronouns for God.

Our fifth story, §5, was about a loving relationship in which each, while sensitive to the other's convictions & feelings, witnessed to the other without any verbal suppression....By way of contrast, the preacher in story #4 said, in the Talk-Back, that he does not bear his Christian witness to Jews: he's an antisupersessionist (ie, he does not believe that Christianity, for Jews, "supercedes" Judaism). His proof-text was Ro.11.29: God doesn't revoke his promises to Israel. Conveniently, he did not allude to this earlier in Paul's same letter (1.16 CED): "The good news ["gospel" of/about Jesus] is God's powerful way of saving all people who have faith, whether they are Jews or Gentiles." The later passage is a meditation on the mystery of Jewish/Christian relations, a meditation (chaps.9-11) with continuing relevance as we Christians & Jews strive to understand & love each other, & to witness together where we can, & to work together where we have common convictions for action but cannot merge our confessional words. The earlier passage, on universal evangelism, states plainly that what God has done in Christ is for everybody, for the world. Classical Christian thinking holds these two passages, with their essential truths, in creative tension.