

THE AUTHORITY OF A GROUND-&-ATMOSPHERE IDEA

In any culture at any one time, some ideas are (consciously) stood on (as "ground," "foundation"), some are (unconsciously) breathed (as "very air," "atmosphere"), & a few--very few, often only one--are both. This Thinksheet is about this third type of idea, which let's call "first-class." The first-class idea I aim to treat of is now regnant in our liberal culture/church. It is equality.

1 The Bible's first-class idea (on which #2867) is **obedience**, the world-word (word signaling a world) inclusive of God & all aspects of the divine-cosmic & divine-human relationships. The revealed analogical authority-figures are the loving father, the benevolent monarch, the righteous judge, the compassionate patron, & the suffering servant ("the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand" [Is.53.10b]). (An occasional woman--e.g. Deborah--stepped into an authority role, & the boy Jesus was "obedient" [L.2.51] to both parents. But the Bible's cultures & religions [Judaism & Christianity] did not have female authority-figures either in heaven or on earth. We need to step out of those cultures into ours; but if we step out of these religions' revealed analogical authority-figures, we are out of these religions.)

2 The Western Enlightenment's first-class idea is the unquestioned life-enhancement from the increase ("progress") in **knowledge**: *Crescat scientia, vita excolatur* (the U. of Chicago motto: "As knowledge increases, life is enriched [exfoliates]"). This naive half-truth still has a tight grip on Western education, which continues under the romantic illusion that human beings are "basically" good despite the long wisdom teaching us that we have in us a tendency to evil (*yetser ra'*) as well as a tendency to good (*yetser tov*)....The computer is the latest idol in the long history of Enlightenment religion. A recent NEW YORKER cartoon pictures a huge mouse staring at a computer while manipulating a small man--the reversal in Emerson's bon mot "Things are in the saddle and riding man."....Technology has enhanced the authority of knowledge in this "Information [really, Communication] Age." With his two partners, a member of our congregation is putting a computer center in each Eskimo (Inuit) village all around the North Polar region, greatly increasing the Inuit sense of national identity, unity, & therefore power. As a committed Christian, he's concerned as to how to use for Christ the international power-authority opening this success has granted him. The ancients knew it: "Knowledge is power."

3 And of course **money** is power, has authority, & (even more than knowledge) must be obeyed (or, as my father often put it, "is unforgiving"). Once a society is too complex for the barter system, money is lifeblood no matter the political economy. The smartest Third-World money now bypasses governments to stake small, very small, entrepreneurs--call it, in a nonMarxist sense, "people's capitalism." Authority abides wherever capital resides: that's the realism grounding both idealism & ideologies. But where authority abides, bureaucracy soon presides & human needs are set aside as secondary considerations (as in the U.S. public-school educracy & in much U.S. government at all levels). But the Bible is right: Money is weaker than love, as human love is weaker than divine love. The common Christian & the creative theologian need to stand on, & together breathe & live, this first-class idea.

4 In §1 I've stated the Bible's *objective* first-class idea. It's *subjective* first-class idea can't be better put than Augustine puts it in his CONFESSIONS: "You have made us for Yourself, & our hearts are restless till they rest in You." When we have come to love the One who commands us to obey, we have come to love to obey: an obedience as something to lift is absorbed into obedience as lifting us. The Law is still there, but it has fulfilled its primary function, viz, to lead us as "pedagogue" (Gal.3.24,25, NRSV "disciplinarian") to the school of Christ....In the best thing I've ever read on the Augustinian dichotomies' basis of Western democracy, Glenn Tinder (Polisci emeritus, U.Mass.) has this pregnant sentence: "Freedom is nullified by sin, necessarily checked by law, and dependent altogether on grace."* Parse that master-statement for the power of sin & the authority of both **law** & **grace**....In Augustine's mind, I may say, a first-class idea was the creational-reality-based need to respect, & live, both ends of certain dichotomies (in addition to objective/subjective) on which our freedom (& therefore our salvation) depends. If we throw out of balance any dichotomy, we enslave ourselves to sin. Think this first-class idea

in faith/reason, church/state, public/private, executive/legislature, history/eschatology, pagan era / Christian era, freedom/law, freedom/grace, universality/particularity, City of God / City of Man. Dichotomies, antitheses. Augustine "tolerated, and even emphasized, polarities and tensions" (G.T.36; "To love God rightly was to fulfill every passion; to avoid idolatry was to eschew extremism of every kind.")

5 At this Thinksheet's beginning, I promised to treat of equality as "the first-class idea...now regnant in our liberal culture/church." Augustine's mind (& authority!) asks us to ask ourselves whether equality is in dichotomous polarity with some other value: what's its value-matrix? Let's put it this way: **equality/solidarity** is the left pole of which the right is **liberty/responsibility** (on the right, my construal; on the left, that of Michael Walzer, 3.24.97 THE NEW REPUBLIC).

A quasihumorous case: Mary Stewart VanLeeuwen is challenging the founder of Promise Keepers as to his view of "gender equality," which she mistakenly thinks is a biblical value. The 1.2 million P.K.s at the Washington rally were into men's responsibility (a biblical value correlative with the dignity of choice, of freedom, of liberty): for that virtue & vision, the rally was an expression of their solidarity. One responsibility a husband has is to submit to his wife (who in this is superior, not equal!). "The mutual superiority of the sexes" (chap.7 of my FLOW OF FLESH, ...) is the dynamic biblical ground-&-atmosphere idea now in competition with the static political idea of gender equality, which has so seeped into liberal-church leadership as to displace the biblical deity with a politically correct, gender-neutral "God" of whom no gender pronouns are to be used! (I am "judgmental" against all equality-mongers, but especially those who eisegete their gender politics into Scripture, then exegete into new styles of sexual ethics & politics [new bastard uses of the scriptural sanction, with the implicit undergirding of the divine sanction--the moral issue here being hermeneutical integrity].)

6 Dialectical freedom is lost when any dichotomy--in this case, submission/equality--collapses. (Compare the tragedy of the collapse of reason into faith [the Dark Ages] or vice versa [the Enlightenment].) As early as $\frac{1}{4}$ century ago (#721) I railed against the baleful educational effects of collapsing submission (students studying "under" the teacher) into equality ("peer learning," "participation groups," "collegiality"). I was equally against collapsing equality into submission (& in a half doz. Thinksheet had shown the dialectical possibilities in keeping vigorous both poles of the dichotomy, with appropriate distinctions between authority & power & among the types of power). Then, twenty years ago (#922, "Equality as excessive claim..."), I showed how "Jesus both outwits and transcends the power perspective of both superior/inferior and equality. This Thinksheet is, in obedience here to Jesus, an attack on the culture-bound, politics-conformed notion of 'equality' as a primary human value....How can 'each esteem the other better' [Phil.2.3] when under the oppressive doctrine of 'equality'? How can one even experience the freedom of being inferior?"

7 As a slogan, "equality" is idolatrously hypertrophied into an unexamined **absolute** & thus a synonym for "justice," "compassion," & some other Good Things you can think of, esp. "freedom" & "liberation." Besides being distortive of truth, this unlimited semantic spread of the word perverts every dimension of human relations & even the divine-human relationship. We can check this dismal spread if we learn to "ask better questions," as this cartoon puts it.

M.S. VanLeeuwen's to the Promise Keepers' founder is an instance of a poor question, for it uses gender equality as an absolute (& therefore unlimited) value. A better question, deabsolutizing (ie, relativizing) "equality": In each particular situation in which "equality" is (or is to be) used, what factors (dichotomies, semantic matrices) should be seen to limit the meaning of "equality"?

THE SMALL SOCIETY

By Bill Yates



8 In light of that "better question," let's look at the kinds, types, of equality:

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(1) **Creational** equality, a fiction created by the Enlightenment's need (as in the Declar. of Indep.'s "created equal") to provide (to use a later metaphor) a level playingfield for the rational-free individual ("endowed by their Creator with...liberty"). Even if "all men" is taken (as it shouldn't be) in the narrow gender sense, how *unequal* we human males are physically (in health & strength), mentally (in IQ), morally (in aptitude for empathy & right/wrong discernment), even spiritually (in longing for the transcendent)! (The Bible details these dimensions of the human being in the context of the call to love God: Deut.6.5, Mt.22.37, M.12.33, L.10.27.)Include women in "men" & the picture becomes even more complex. Eg, $\frac{1}{2}$ of humanity has muscle-force inferior to that of the other $\frac{1}{2}$ (with, of course, a few individual exceptions [including the current muscle-woman craze]): what did the Creator have in mind in creating that *inequality*--or is the very question "sexist" & unworthy of "doing theology" on? Theologize it or not, it is a root of gender feminism's resentment (in some, esp. some lesbians, misandry [man-hate]), other roots being the male's comparative freedoms from reproduction (viz, no conception, gestation, parturition, lactation-nursing, even pedagogy--the mother's educational responsibility being greater no matter how the father "helps")--male freedoms *from* + tandem freedoms *to* (eg, to pursue career while the wife is waylaid with child processes). Let's call all this resentment feminism, birthed in 1964 with the pub. of Betty Friedan's THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE & peaking in Mary Daly's hatred for males & the Bible's "male" deity. Disastrously, some liberal theologians let Daly set the agenda of language for God: they stopped using the Bible's (masculine) pronouns for God out of fear that continuing the biblical pronominal practice would be seen as pushing a male deity! (So powerful an influence on liberal theology is that one lesbian atheist ex-nun!)

(2) **Relational** equality has several senses:

((1)) Ecological. Radical ecologists teach that we are as a species not more than equal to other fauna & flora, & our superior powers do not privilege us to ab/use the rest of nature. Some truths here, but a violation of the humanity/nature dichotomy balance.

((2)) Political. We are equal face-to-face with "the law," the whole decisional-jurisprudential structure of our American society.

((3)) Social. We have, at least theoretically, equal access of association, the right to join.

((4)) Economic. Here a distinction:
equality of opportunity, a liberal doctrine.
equality of result, a radical (socialist, leftist) doctrine, destroying the Declar. of Indep.'s equality/liberty dichotomy: as communism has proved, liberty (given human beings' vast differences of abilities, energies, drives, "luck") is incompatible with the equality-of-result goal, which however is self-defeating because suppressing liberty eliminates the very forces needed to pursue equality of result.

((5)) Theological. While creational equality (that we are equal face-to-face with one another as human beings) is a *fiction*, theological equality is a *fact* (we are equally face-to-face with God, who doesn't play preferences ["face-noticing": Ac.10.34, Ro.2.11, Eph.6.9, Col.3.25; & the proscription of classism in Jas.2.1,9]). In Ro.1-3, Paul uses this theological equality-idea to reject any claims of preference: we human beings are all equally sinners, an implication of the fact that we all stand equally face-to-face with God the Judge....When theological equality is the reigning first-class ground-&-atmosphere *leitmotiv*, all other kinds-types of equality are subordinated, relativized, as are all human conditions of sex/race/ethnicity/class/nation.

9 In the birth of the U.S., the fiction of creational equality floated atop the general though largely vague conviction of theological equality, with the result that equality & liberty held each other in check. Less than a generation later, the French Revolution's "LIBERTY, EQUALITY, FRATERNITY!" was without theological foundation & proved evanescent, crucifying justice. Long ago, in #856 ("Liberty and/or Equality..."), I put it thus: "Liberty and equality--like Jews and Greeks under the Romans--can both be present in a healthy society only when each is limited, in the interest of the other, by JUSTICE as the reigning value; and this taming

of the lust of each can be done in both the economic & the political realms. This, as I see it, is what truth & love should strive for in a positive...attack on nationalism, classism, racism, & sexism."....In the next Thinksheet (#857), I sketched the judgmental ("under God" the Judge) function of balancing the interests-claims:

The arrows indicate the errors of giving too much weight to liberty (laissez-faire, romantic individualism, hedonism--ending in the anarchy of l-dolatry) or to equality (social engineering such as busing & affirmative action, restrictive trade policies, anticartelism, quotas, state planning [severe reduction of private property]--ending in the tyranny of a power-elite minority). In this perspective, "justice" cannot side with either: the fulcrum, by the decrees of God the Judge, must remain the fulcrum.



10 "Decrees": The biblical God is Creator-Lawgiver-Judge (three modalities of power) & Lover-Redeemer (love being the counterpoint of power, with God's will as fulcrum). Some religions have gods for the hard-masculine power note & goddesses for the soft-feminine love note: monotheism must manage the two notes in one deity, who (in biblical religion, Jewish & Christian) is addressed & referred to as masculine (his power establishing the order basic to freedom, whose [feminine] purpose is love--the dichotomy-polarity of order/freedom)....Let's see how this works in a grand old hymn (excluded from the new UCC hymnal because its language is so masculine that to gender-neutralize it would be to shred the hymn). Notice the grounding in "commands," "precepts," & that love is its tone:

How gentle God's commands, / how kind his precepts are! / Come, cast your burdens on the Lord, / and trust his constant care. // While providence supports, / let saints securely dwell; / That hand which bears all nature up / shall guide his children well. // Why should this anxious load / press down your weary mind? / Haste to your heavenly Father's throne, / and sweet refreshment find. // His goodness stands approved, / down to the present day; / I'll drop my burden at his feet, / and bear a song away.

The One who means us well is in charge of "all nature": power & love converge in the "constant care" of his "providence." Early 18th c. yes, but profoundly biblical. A song sailing on the sea of a first-class, ground-&-atmosphere idea of unassailable authority.

The power/love duality is a commonplace of Scripture (as in all the "You shall love...." passages: command/love). Sometimes its masculine/feminine gender base becomes explicit. While Paul might "make demands" on his apostolic authority granted him when Jesus knocked him off his horse & temporarily blinded him (Ac.9, 22,26: masculine violence!), he prefers gentleness like that of a nursing mother (1 Thes.2.7; next v.: as the nursing mother literally gives herself, Paul gives himself, not only the gospel, to those he's come to love; not long after, he makes further use of the feminine: "I am in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you" [Gal.4.19; & in several other passages, apostolic suffering is a birth pang of the new creation]). (Equality feminists feel insulted by the analogical use of female biology; too bad for them, & all the rest of us.)

11 Consistently in the Bible, the feminine-love note rests upon, & fulfils, the masculine-power note. Eve is taken out of, & completes, Adam. Even in the John literature (the Gospel & the letters), God is not love except in the context of being Lord (eg, Jn.15.10ff: "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love....This is my commandment, that you love one another....You are my friends if you do what I command you....You did not choose me but I chose you....I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another"; 1Jn.2ff: "By this we may be sure that we know him ["the Father" &/or "Jesus Christ"], if we obey his commandments....whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection....an old commandment....a new commandment....Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil....love is from God....God is love....if we love one another, God lives in us....the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments [obedience=love])." When the canonical union of commandment/love is lost, the loveless commandment is oppressive & uncommanded love is (as now in so much "feminist theology") sentimental, religion gone soft & flabby. Against these sick fragments, the Bible maintains the healthy tension, in God & in community, between the priority of the masculine & the superiority of the feminine. That is the ground-&-atmosphere idea which carries revelational authority.