

(1980, 1983, 1985)

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I want to begin by saying that inclusive language is not the issue; exclusive language is. The continued use of language for humanity or the divine in a way which excludes or denigrates women's life experiences and women's reality, and which is based in sexist (or for that matter, racist) presuppositions — that is the issue. Today I want to identify and begin to elucidate several theological issues arising from this tension within our faith community. Because of the nature of this symposium, I will not be addressing current translation debates, nor the practical issues of the rendering of specific words in a more inclusive manner.

The first and fundamental issue that exclusive language raises is: Who is God to us, and how do we know? Our advocacy of inclusive language is based in a conviction that God is beyond our knowing, that every one of us has access to a bit of the knowledge of God, and that one of the tasks of the faith community is to open ourselves up in as many ways as possible to the experience of the divine. That was the way Jesus' teaching functioned: creating metaphors and drawing on constructs from life that opened up the God-experience, making it accessible to any person.

There are three historic sources of authority for Christians. Some of us place in highest regard the Bible, some the tradition of the church, and some the believer's experience with God. These three ways have coexisted for centuries, sometimes peacefully, often at odds. Our present debates in the UCC represent in part just one more flare-up of an ancient enmity among these three, an enmity based in our inability to hear, to understand, and to honor one another.

We have in the present debates an opportunity to overcome some of that enmity both in the way we conduct ourselves and in the way we frame the issues. I do not mean by this that we must avoid confrontation and conflict. Rather, I mean that we must face directly into the conflict, state it as clearly as possible, and risk loving one another in the midst of it.

Debates about inclusive and exclusive language have been a gift to the Church, for they have forced us back to this fundamental question, "Who is God, and how do we know?"

God is spirit. And when we attempt to speak of God, we inevitably use metaphor and image. Yet metaphors and images must retain their fluidity and resiliency to function theologically. As soon as they ossify, they become idols and make us into idolaters. Masculine language for God is idolatrous now. Though it may once have been a flowing metaphor, the fact that people fight for its retention demonstrates its idolatrous nature.

This first question challenges us to stretch our sense of God and to open ourselves to the many ways of knowing God through experience, tradition, and Bible.

Following upon the first, I have to ask the second question: "Whose tradition?" When we speak of the tradition of the church, we must question who participated in forming that tradition. And I ask you, how many women were at Jamnia when the rabbis closed the canon? How many women were at Nicea or Chalcedon? What woman can you name as a Mother of the Church? I have my days when I am tempted to say that

women's exclusion from the tradition totally invalidates its authority. But that would not be entirely fair. That tradition authentically represents the thoughtful consensus of the (albeit male) leadership of the Christian church in that time. Its authority is limited by its exclusiveness, but not totally invalidated.

Ironically, the very faith they sought to interpret and to encapsulate becomes their judge. The faith of Jesus of Nazareth was a simple yet profound faith which showed forth dramatically in inclusion and empowerment. The poor and outcast, the despised and powerless, yes and even women, were definitively and dramatically included in the teachings and the ministry of this Jesus. That the Christian Church was so quick to shed its inclusiveness and its empowerment of all people is a matter of history. It is a source of embarrassment and shame, and should bring us up short whenever we believe we are faithfully representing the gospel. All of us have blinders and filters on the eyes God gave us.

This second question reminds us that the issue of power and participation is a valid Christian criterion for weighing authority, if not authenticity. Authority and faithfulness live in tension with one another.

A third issue presses in upon us, and this pushes us to the edge of our ability to communicate. There are some I have encountered within the United Church of Christ who insist that we must use the same words or we do not share the same belief. And so I ask, do we mean the same thing when we say the same words? Is it possible that the same substance can be meant when we use different words? Take the Trinity. I contend that "Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit" are just one way of speaking of the three "persons" of the Trinity. The use of those specific words does not make one of us more of a trinitarian than another who chooses to use a longer formulation to point to the same reality. The determination of the Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry document that the traditional formulation must be used in baptism comes frighteningly close to the institution of a magic formula. To suggest as some have, that the words, "in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" are required for a baptism to be authentically Christian implies that the words themselves (not the reality to which they point) have a mystical power. And that, few of us are prepared to accept.

The fourth theological dimension of exclusivist language centers in the Bible's role in our life. Is the Bible authoritative because it is the Word of God? Or is it authoritative because it points to, reveals, conveys, makes possible the experience of the Word of God? And if we believe it points to the Word of God, what do we do when the words it uses block the evangelical task? Historically, the believing community has substituted new words, added to the text, translated into common language, and sought to allow the text to reveal rather than obstruct the dynamic power of the Word of God. We cannot allow the Bible's reduction to the status of a quaint museum piece or to that of a false god in our time. We must insist on its life and its liveliness!