

A Memorial to the 79th General Convention

To the Deputies and Bishops of The Episcopal Church assembled at the 79th General Convention:

We, the undersigned laity and clergy of the Episcopal Church, deputies and non-deputies, call upon the Episcopal Church, the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music, and any body that may engage in revision of the Book of Common Prayer, or produce other liturgies for the use of this Church, to keep the following things close to their hearts, and at the forefront of their minds:

The Episcopal Church affirms the Baptismal promise to “continue in the apostles’ teaching” (BCP 304) as part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. Therefore this teaching ought to be reflected in our liturgy.

We affirm that the Christological titles found in the New Testament are integral to the Gospel. While some of these are experienced negatively in the world because of human sin, we affirm that Jesus redeems that which is abused. The dominion of Jesus Christ is not analogous to these concepts as they operate according to the logic of the world. Instead, it subverts them. It is good news for all people that Jesus is the Lord, the true King who upholds them and overturns abusive powers.

We affirm that the Incarnation of Jesus Christ was a real historic event, such that the Jesus of history is the Christ of Faith, and this Incarnation is eternal. Therefore Jesus’ clearly-expressed gender as a human man, though not theologically significant for salvation, is a real and important part of what occurred when the Word was made Flesh and lived among us as a gendered human being (John 1:14).

We affirm that the Trinitarian language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is not simply metaphorical but is an important part of the inheritance of the catholic faith grounded in the revelation of Jesus, who himself referred to God as “Father” and taught us to pray in that manner. We come to know God the Father as the specific and particular Father of the Son. Therefore the Fatherhood of God is not a platonic form for human fatherhood, nor is it an extrapolation from human fatherhood. It instead grows from the identity of Jesus as the Son who prayed to the Father, and commanded that his disciples baptize in his Father’s name, his own name, and in the name of The Holy Spirit. Retaining the Trinitarian language revealed by scripture and tradition is essential for us as part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, for our ecumenical commitments, and for our faithfulness to the Apostles’ teaching.

We affirm that balanced, expansive, and gender-neutral language for God ought to be explored, and the whole range of Biblical images for God should be made use of in our worship, within the bounds of the scripture and the Apostolic Catholic faith; whereas gender-neutral language for humanity ought to be actively pursued, as our relationship to our own gender identity constitutes a significant part of our experience as mortal humans.

We commend the establishing of theological norms for the use of gendered, non-gendered, inclusive, balanced, and expansive language in the liturgies of this church, and ask that such norms be clearly articulated and affirmed by General Convention so as to guide any future process of Prayer Book Revision.

Explanation:

Our Baptismal promises require us to take seriously the Apostolic Faith we inherited in the Holy Scriptures and the Creeds. The late theologian C. B. Moss pointed out that “the Christian Faith is a revealed religion. Its original sources are prophecy, not philosophy” (*The Christian Faith* 35.1). As our Catechism says, the Holy Scriptures are the inspired Word of God written (BCP 853), by which we can recognize what is and is not the work of the Holy Spirit (BCP 852). We are therefore called to take seriously what Holy Spirit has revealed through the writers and prophets and, more importantly, what Jesus revealed about God and our relationship to God. This relationship between the Church and our Lord finds its ultimate expression in the Eucharist, and so must be, as Jesus said, a relationship in “Spirit and in Truth” (John 4:23). Such truth as is always defined by Jesus who is the Truth (John 14:6). Therefore our liturgy must conform to the Spirit’s revelation, and so too must our language of and about God be guided primarily by revelation—both in the Holy Scriptures, and more importantly in the Word made flesh, Jesus the Son (John 1:14, Hebrews 1:2).

We understand some have experienced abuse at the hands of people in power. However, the proper response to this abuse is redemption rather than destruction. As Thomas Aquinas said, “grace does not destroy nature but perfects it” (ST I.1.8.r2). We recognize the role of human reason and knowledge in theology, that it can be sanctified and redeemed by the Spirit. Along with this, God will redeem all creation (Romans 8:21), and so we know nothing created is bad in itself, but everything is subject to the corruption of sin. This also applies to lordships, power structures, authorities, dominion, and gender. None of these are bad or sinful in themselves, but good and created of God. Certainly there are many “lords”, “gods”, and “powers” which claim our allegiance and are not of God, and those we must reject as false gods who are under God’s judgment. For the nature of power in the human world does tend toward selfish domination, a paradigm Jesus overturned on the Cross by displaying self-giving love for the world he created by his atoning death at the hands of those in power. Therefore, the proper response to the abuse of power is not to remove the language of power from our common prayer but to redeem it. The Good News for the powerless is the original confession that Jesus is Lord (Romans 10:9) and the King of kings and Lord of lords (Revelation 19:16) who rules by right over the abusive powers and authorities, and so has the right to judge them for their role in abuse. It is the Good News of salvation for the orphan and widow that the true King is on their side, (Psalm 146:9) and he will restore power, dominion, and authority to their redeemed and sanctified form. Removing the language of lordship dilutes that Gospel of hope for those who need the power of God to save them from false lords and unjust powers.

This Jesus whom we worship is the Incarnate King and remains in his Resurrected Incarnate body a human male; for the Christ of Faith is the same Jesus of History. Our Faith is a historic faith rooted in real events whereby God stepped into human history to save a broken world from sin and death. True, Jesus being a male is not significant for salvation—the main point being that the Divine Person of the Son took on human nature, to live and die as one of us for our salvation—but his gender was and is still a part of who he is. To remove gender from Jesus is to dehumanize him and reduce the importance of the Incarnation as truly becoming a human being. Gender is a part of the human experience and Jesus experienced and identified as a male, an identity we should respect.

As this Jesus is the very image of the invisible God, (Colossians 1:15) his words and language should be the primary source of our own. The Trinitarian language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not merely metaphors, but part of the inheritance of the catholic faith grounded in the revelation of Jesus. It was Jesus himself who referred to God as Father and taught us to pray in that manner. After Jesus the Church worked long and hard to understand the best way to talk about God without falling into modalism with phrases such as “Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier”. Indeed, all three Divine Persons are involved in creation, redemption, and sanctification. Preserving the revelation by Scripture and Tradition of Trinitarian language is central to being part of God’s One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church which remains faithful to the Apostles’ testimony about Jesus and his teachings.

Finally, the Scriptures reveal to us a God of all, who is beyond the created world and who made all that is, seen and unseen, out of nothing. This God is not like other gods who were merely forces of nature or part of creation as animals, plants, and rocks. Instead the God of Israel is without a body and completely non-material. So we know that God has no body and is therefore outside of gender. Human language, though, needs gender to communicate and God was inculturated by means of the Hebrew and Greek language as a male most of the time. Within this revelation, there is room for expansive language both following Biblical precepts and gender-neutral references, in accordance with the catholic teaching that the Divine Person of the Father and Spirit are bodiless and therefore genderless. It is also true that we are gendered as embodied human beings, and our liturgy ought to reflect us accurately. Jesus did not just die for all “men” but for all human beings. In that sense, Scripture does reflect the language of its time in using, for example, “brothers” to mean “brothers and sisters” as a familial term within the new reality of the Body of Christ. Our hermeneutic takes this cultural aspect of language into account, a reality that can and should be updated in our worship without doing injustice to the words and nature of Jesus, who he was and is, and who he revealed God to be.

Respectfully submitted,

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