

Language of Liturgy

by Cynthia A. Jarvis

Nassau Presbyterian Church, Princeton, New Jersey

The only reference to language in the index to Calvin's *Institutes* directs us to a section on prayer where Calvin asserts, ". . . public prayers must be couched not in Greek among the Latins, nor in Latin among the French or English, as has hitherto been the custom, but in the language of the people, which can generally be understood by the whole assembly. For this ought to be done for the edification of the whole church, which receives no benefit whatever from a sound not understood" (*Institutes* III: 20, 33).

With a simple statement and a biblical reference (1 Cor. 14:16-17), Calvin began the greatest revolution in liturgy and worship that the church would know, a revolution that is never ending because the "language of the people" is ever changing. Calvin's matter-of-fact directory leads us still into a labyrinth of questions about the nature of liturgical language and human understanding today, questions Calvin never dreamed would proceed from his belief that liturgy should lead to understanding.

The most obvious and difficult question that presents itself to every age, every denomination and every congregation is, what is the language of the people? Whose language? Which people? Did Calvin mean that we should speak to God as we speak to our next door neighbor or our five year old child? Did he mean to imply that all of the people in a particular congregation or even denomination share the same use and understanding of language, thereby making the language of worship an act of community consensus? When he says that language should be "generally" understood, how general can that be? Should child-oriented images be used at all times so that the "least of these" is included in understanding? Or whose understanding of language should take precedence? The feminists (male and female) who cry out that they are excluded by the images or the tradition and the sex-exclusive pronouns or the traditionalists (male and female) who insist that their faith has been shattered if God the Father is not referred to as "Thou"?

What people are we considering when we speak of this "language of the people?" Whose language shall prevail? And underlying all these questions is the even more elusive question that stalks any minister, worship committee, or Task Force on the Service for the Lord's Day: by what authority do we decide upon the language of liturgy? the authority of Scripture? of tradition? or the authority of the street corner?

Before liturgical language can be considered, the current state of the language of the people needs to be examined. Language is, first of all, one way we communicate with each other and with God. It is the means by which we belong to a particular community. It is a vehicle for misunderstanding as well as understanding, for revelation as well as hiddenness, for emotion as well as reason, for tradition as well as revolution. We learn to speak and listen in the

context of a community that teaches us language's function and its meaning. We speak within a variety of communities and embrace a multitude of languages. A family will have a way of communicating that may seem like nonsense to the outsider but makes perfect sense to the youngest child. A town may have a code of meaning that is unlocked only after years of residence. A profession involves a process whereby a student learns a language and is admitted into the profession when that language is internalized.

One of those communities of language is the religious community. Its language participates in a historical tradition of language and, at the same time, partakes of the social, cultural and linguistic nuances of its own day and location. The language of the community of faith differs from place to place but in each place it is somehow transmitted from generation to generation, preserved in sacred texts, presented anew in confessions and, if luck is with the community, made alive in liturgy. The language of liturgy is a language not only of the people here and now but somehow participates with a cloud of witnesses who have come before and whose language is strangely our own. The language of liturgy must be connected with the language of tradition because part of the work of liturgy is the act of remembering who we are. We are strangers and sojourners, a wandering Aramian was our father, Naomi our mother, and our brothers and sisters had nowhere to lay their heads.

Yet in the same breath liturgy is an act whereby we reappropriate that language and those stories for our time and speak in a way that propels us into a promised future. The words by which we come to glorify God must have everything to do with who we have been, who we are and who we are called to be. Or, to move from the self-centeredness of our age to the piety of our reformed tradition, the words must have everything to do with who God has been, who God is, and who God has promised to be! It is in the traffic between past and present, present and future, that a tension arises. For always in the community there are those who have made an idol of the language of tradition, and always there are those who would recast the tradition around current ideology so that with little intention on anyone's part, the community is left speechless before the Lord; without a common language, agreeable to all parties, that will suffice for the language of the people.

The problem may not be the language that has ceased to be common; it may be merely a reflection of the state of the community which has ceased to be a community. Or it may be a symptom of a larger ailment in a society where people possess the most sophisticated means of communication but have lost the capacity to understand. At any rate, for the religious community, the crisis of language, the claims of the past, the fears of the future all converge as the community struggles from silence to speech, from privatized prayers to public proclamation, from individualized concerns to corporate worship.

Amos Wilder, in his forward to *Grace Confounding: Poems*, analyzes the underlying issue of liturgical language in this way: "It is in the area of liturgics—the idiom and metaphors of prayer and witness—that the main impasse lies today for the Christian. It is at the level of the imagination that the fateful issues of our new world-experience must first be mastered. It is here that culture and history are broken and here that the church is polarized. Old words

do not reach across the new gulfs, and it is only in vision and oracle that we can chart the unknown and new-name the creatures."

He goes on to say in *Theopoetics*, "Religious communication generally must overcome a long addiction to the discursive, the rationalistic, and the prosaic. And the Christian imagination must go halfway to meet the new dreams, mystiques, and mythologies that are gestating in our time (Because) Imagination is a necessary component of all profound knowing and celebration; all remembering, realizing, and anticipating; all faith, hope and love. Where imagination fails, doctrines become ossified, witness and proclamation wooden, doxologies and litanies empty, consolations hollow and ethics legalistic" (*Theopoetics*, 1-2).

Imagination is a dangerous word for it has been used, particularly in our time, to grant authority to the interior landscape of any given individual. Yet it is a word that must be explored in relationship to the language of liturgy. Imagination in Wilder's understanding is not the daydream of some self-important cleric, but has more to do with H. Richard Niebuhr's observation made in an appendix to *The Responsible Self* where he asserts that "We are far more image-making and image using creatures than we usually think ourselves to be and, further, that our processes of perception and conception, of organizing and understanding the signs that come to us in our dialogue with the circumambient world are guided and formed by images in our mind" (*Responsible Self*, 151-152).

In a word, the images that are held in solution in the language of liturgy are of vital importance because with those images (more than propositions, more than rational arguments) we return to the known world to do battle with the powers and principalities; with those images (more than ethical norms or moral pronouncements) we turn to the one beside us; with those images (more than doctrine or theological treatise) we bow down before the One who loved us before we even had a name. The language of liturgy, if it is to be something more than a "sound not understood," if it is to be the "language of the people" must be language that understands the role of the common imagination in the community of faith. It must acknowledge and embrace the wealth of images given in the biblical text and the tradition; it must be aware and yet wary of the images that present themselves in the midst of the present age; it must anticipate the vision of the future that does not proceed from the present but is promised.

Now, language that partakes more of images is language replete with metaphors. It does not call things by their common, comfortable names, but calls them by a different name and thereby reaches out to the imaginations of all who are present to "tease" them into active participation. Metaphor recognizes the tension that is part and parcel of speaking at all about God. It quivers on the edge of what cannot be said and what somehow must be spoken. It acknowledges the precariousness of words by asserting what is maximal and claiming what is minimal. It reaches back to stories about the exodus, the exile, the wandering in the wilderness and places it on top of this technological age until all gathered begin to cry out in recognition. It sings psalms that release emotions whose source has not changed in centuries and whose circumstances

have been altered only in degree. It speaks in parables that still let loose the Kingdom yet to come for those who have ears to hear.

The language and images of Scripture are strangely ours. For all their ancient cadences, pastoral settings, war-like tales, terrible and tender characters, and alien culture, they still catch the rhythm of our human hearts and set them beating toward belief. The central language of liturgy in the Reformed tradition remains the language of Scripture. We need only learn to plumb its depths and reach out for its variety. We must struggle together to recognize that though it is language from a culture where men were little less than gods, the amazing grace is that, in spite of that fact, women and the feminine are to be found and followed.

The current debate over the Inclusive Language Lectionary sponsored by the National Council of Churches raises a multitude of questions about how the language of Scripture becomes our own. For some the language of Scripture is ours to mold and becomes our own only as we remove it from the patriarchal prison of an earlier age. The operative authority for such "translation" issues from current ideas of justice, equality, and inclusiveness that the biblical text is presumed to intend. Therefore the language of Scripture resumes some semblance of authority in the community of faith as it is made to conform to current, non-sexist linguistic standards.

For others the language of Scripture becomes our own through the act of proclamation that takes a given text and by the activity of the Holy Spirit struggles to help all gathered hear that word as a word to them and for them. This may mean acknowledging the historical context, citing the social differences, commenting on the limits of any given metaphor, proclaiming not always the letter of the lesson but the grace of it all. In this case the authority resides somewhere between the words of Scripture and the workings of the Holy Spirit. Truth and justice come not by way of literal exactitude but rather they struggle for expression through the limited utterances of human beings—the ones who wrote the original text and the ones who now are claimed by that text in spite of *and* because of its historical boundedness.

How the community of faith appropriates or subjects itself to the biblical witness is not just an issue for feminists but is a critical issue for the whole church. If the biblical text must *literally* conform to our ever-enlightened concept of God and the human community then we will soon have little more than the shell of a canon, which will be increasingly subjected to the prevailing ideas of justice and equality. If, instead, the biblical text stands, subject to retranslations that acknowledge the fluidity of language (i.e., man no longer functions generically) but that preserve the original, historically-bounded meaning (i.e., sometimes Paul meant to address men and not men and women), then the text will call us again and again into its tensions and surprise us again and again by its grace. To end where we began: the language and images of Scripture are strangely ours, not comfortably ours. If they are truly heard as a word to us, then feminist and traditionalist alike will be found on his or her knees before the terrible and tender mercies of a God who chose to be known by us but never finally named by us.

Beyond the language of Scripture, the language of liturgy is the language

of tradition. A cloud of witnesses has preceded us and left us a storehouse of prayers and petitions from ages when the imagination had not failed but flourished. Their instincts for awe, for praise, for mystery, for majesty can teach us in this age, can reactivate our capacity for imagining, can humble us before the generations that have risen and fallen before us, can remind us that before we were God was and after we have been God will be. The language of tradition also creates in us a tension, an awareness that the world was called by different names, names not of our choosing but ours, nonetheless. It reminds us that our faith is a historical faith and our God a God of history. Therefore the shortsightedness of another time cautions us of the myopia of our own; the social structures held in the language of another age make us aware of the social structures of our own age. To recast the language of another time so that it conforms comfortably to our own time is to miss the historical dimension of incarnation and to avoid the tension that, when placed in the context of human finitude, might lead to understanding. When the language of liturgy is the language of tradition, the tradition must be cited for its shortcomings, celebrated for its grace, but not abandoned because of its humanity.

Finally the language of liturgy is the language of this day. What we can give to our children and our children's children is a new chapter in the liturgical tradition that includes them, that has in it images that do justice to the variety of God's creation, male and female, human and animal, plants and planets. We can create for them and for ourselves a liturgy that refuses to idolize one image of God but dares to be embraced by a God who comes to us always on the edge of language. We can hand to them a liturgical tradition in the sure and certain knowledge that it will be inadequate for their time. We can give them a liturgy that, for future generations, will come up short but will be forgiven because of our limited vision and understanding.

For the language of liturgy is finally and only the language of the people (and wasn't that Calvin's point?) who have been summoned by the Word of God. And in the presence of God, the words that once seemed poetic now only stammer; the prayers that initially moved to tears now sound trite; the responses that for a time captured our feelings now fall flat. For finally, if the language of liturgy brings us to understand anything, it brings us to our knees knowing that the Word is not ours to speak, but God's.