



EXPERIMENTS IN GOSPEL TRANSLATION, PART II

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In the first part of this essay, we looked at Luther's rationale for his Bible translations, set within his wider commitment to the vernacular (both linguistic and cultural) as a practical enactment of Reformation theology. Then we saw how a similar kind of logic to Luther's is applied in contemporary mission efforts to reach Muslims, who instinctively misunderstand the biblical expression "Son of God" to mean the physical offspring of God's sexual relations with a human female.¹ The question now is how Luther's translation practice and Muslim evangelism can shed light on our own task of speaking the gospel in twenty-first century North America. Listening to mission experiences from other times and places allows us to see our own context in a new light and to escape the shortsightedness of our own inevitable embeddedness in it.²

What bothered the Roman opponents five hundred years ago, and what bothers many Christians today who learn of the various strategies employed in reaching Muslims, is the provisional quality of gospel translation. It really is an *experiment* much of time. Even if it succeeds at first, it may in time lose its particular usefulness and need to be replaced. Words do not keep still. Their meanings drift and change; their ability to express meanings accurately is thus temporally limited.³ If that is the case with words, how much more with cultural practices, which draw on all kinds of implicit assumptions and symbolisms within a given society—and no society is itself static.⁴

This is the basic problem of "contextual theology": getting the gospel to make sense, through local appropriation of its message, in order to become a positive witness to the gospel in that particular time and place. Some proponents of the practice lose the theological center altogether in

their eagerness to speak contextually,⁵ but that is simply the inverted error of insisting on one single vocabulary that exhaustively, correctly, and eternally expresses the gospel.⁶ The missionary endeavor requires holding both sides together: the Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8) with the Jesus Christ who sent his apostles to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth

(Acts 1:8)—though the difficulty lies only on our side; for Jesus Christ, Lord of all, there is no problem of continuity between these two identities. It is only within this balance that the mission practices of 1) the

"selective mistranslation" of biblical texts and 2) the "temporary withholding" of biblical content can be defended and affirmed as falling within the domain of the Holy Spirit's work of conversion.

The simple fact is that we actually employ these two mission practices all the time, which makes it mighty silly to protest their use among Muslims or other such obviously non-Christian groups. But we tend not to see these practices, or acknowledge them as such, due to our Christendom assumption that the people around us already are Christians. Becoming aware of these practices on a conscious level will help us to do them better—and also to know when it's time to move on.

Children's Bibles

In truth, there's not a single thing a missionary to Muslims does with the biblical text that isn't done—and probably with a whole lot less theological reflection—in children's Bibles. And yet what could be considered more innocuous, more appropriate, more charming? But all the same con-

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cerns apply. There are phrases in the Bible that children wouldn't understand; there are truths that would upset them; there are stories that would traumatize them. In simple fact, the Bible is not a book fit for children. Still, we want children to come to know God through this indispensable means: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." Thus, we sanitize and simplify the troublesome Holy Writ for this particular mission audience.

Children's Bibles, however, are hardly self-evident abbreviations of the original. They are rife with theological and missiological decisions. The three examples I will review here are all Bibles I have used with my own son and chosen in part because of the racial diversity of their illustrations, which better reflects our family.⁷ These and other children's Bibles deserve as much attention and engagement from the church's ministers as weighty volumes written for adults, since they have more immediate impact on the faith of the people—hence the extended attention given to them here.

The Beginner's Bible, boasting over six million copies in print, is geared to a preschool audience.⁸ The biblical source for each of the ninety-four stories is always cited under the title. The content is restricted to stories except for Psalm 23, told through David during his shepherding days, and the Lord's Prayer. Of the Old Testament prophets, only Jonah makes an appearance, undoubtedly because the book is more a narrative than a prophetic poem or diatribe. There's nothing from the epistles, either; the New Testament ends by jumping from Paul's journeys all the way to the New Jerusalem at the end of Revelation.

Of the stories told, inconvenient realities are simply deleted or hidden. We are told that Jacob "fell in love and got married"; that Rahab helped the Israelites, though her profession is kept under wraps; that Deborah led the Israelites to victory, but not that Jael helped with her handy tent-peg; that Samson knocked over the pillars

of the Philistines' temple, but not that he committed suicide in the process. Other disturbing parts are allowed in, though: Esau's anger at Jacob's treachery; the river of blood during the ten plagues; the swallowing up of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea; Saul's jealousy of David; and Judas's bad character, depicted by his seedy, half-shut eyes. The passion of Christ is always a fascinating test case in children's Bibles: here we have an abbreviated account of the ordeal, and the scene of the crucifixion shows Jesus only from the knees down, with Mary hugging his feet so the nails are conveniently concealed. None of Jesus' last words before his death is reported.

Good people or bad, the overall tone of *The Beginner's Bible* is upbeat and cheerful, so much so that even a

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grinning Goliath appears on the cover next to little David, slingshot in hand. The last few pages offer a dictionary of unfamiliar terms.

The *Spark Story Bible* is designed to "spark" young imaginations from age two to grade two and so carries with it all the potential and pitfalls of that missionary act.⁹ I suppose children might enjoy the omnipresence of "the expressive caterpillar, Squiggles," but I find that the very genre of children's Bible blurs the line between fiction and reality for little people who already have difficulty distinguishing between the two, and I don't think Squiggles helps much in that regard. (I have some friends who decided early on to ditch children's Bibles altogether because

their daughters couldn't detect any meaningful difference between Bible figures and cartoon characters.) There is considerable liberty taken in setting the scenes, for instance with exciting noises during creation or baby John waking and crying during Zechariah's hymn; these generally don't impinge upon the content of the story itself but help to make it more accessible to children. The illustrations are vibrant and energetic: particular favorites are Jonah hanging onto the whale's uvula, John the Baptist about to eat a reluctant grasshopper, and Martha stirring the soup with her foot. Unfortunately, the biblical sources are only listed in the Table of Contents, not with the individual stories.

Theologically, *Spark* inspires equal amounts of irritation and appreciation. For one thing, it carefully and often awkwardly avoids pronouns for God—except in Psalm 23, perhaps because the intention is to make the shepherd a "he" rather than God per se. The creation of Adam and Eve is omitted, in either the Genesis 1 or Genesis 2 versions. Instead there is a general remark about God's creation of "people" and their commission to name and care for the creatures of the earth, though certainly not to have dominion. For all *Spark's* efforts to be sensitive, though, there are some flub-ups: for instance, Deborah's story ends with "but finally Barak and the Israelites won," when the whole point is that Barak *didn't* win—the victory went to the women, Deborah and (the once again omitted) Jael.

Spark hammers home the theology of the promise, in principle a good thing, but after about thirty-five reassurances that "God kept God's promise" it begins to sound more like ideology than theology. The monotone presentation of the gospel is matched with a rather pale presentation of the law in the Ten Commandments: "I have important rules for you and the people to live by. You can turn to this list to know how to love God and each other. Do your best to follow this list. It won't be easy, but I am with

you and I love you.” The same softening of biblical content occurs in the prophets, though I do give *Spark* kudos for including any of the prophetic writings at all. From Isaiah: “One angel carried a hot coal and touched it to Isaiah’s mouth. Guess what! The coal didn’t burn! Instead, it took away the fear inside him.” From Jeremiah: “Go tell everybody about my love”—hardly the words I’d use to describe Jeremiah’s painful ministry.

Occasionally, doubtful explanations are interpolated in the stories. In response to the question about paying taxes, Jesus replies: “But remember—everything God made is stamped with the image of God. So be sure to give to God the things that are God’s.” Meanwhile, the moral of the mustard seed of faith is that “God gives you all the faith you need. All you can do is say ‘yes’ to the faith God writes on your heart”—as if centuries of debate hadn’t raged over just such formulations. The response to James and John’s question about sitting with Jesus in heaven is: “You are good friends, but every person has a special place in heaven! No one gets a place that’s more special than anyone else’s”—a bit of a stretch from the original and not a word about the baptism with which Jesus will be baptized. The worst of the lot is the story called “The Holy Spirit Comes Down,” such a convoluted distortion of the original that I actually had to look up the reference in the Table of Contents, only to discover that it was the exact same pericope I had written a lectionary-commentary article on the week before! Cornelius doesn’t even appear in this retelling of Acts 10:44–48, and the Jew-Gentile issue is summarized in wildly misleading fashion: “Did the Holy Spirit come into the hearts of the people who followed God’s rules? Yes! God loved them. Did the Holy Spirit come into the hearts of the people who did not follow God’s rules? Yes! God loved them too.”

On the other hand, much of the time *Spark* presents far more accurate retellings of Bible stories than other

children’s Bibles I’ve seen, and it covers a wider range, too, with one hundred fifty stories in all. The first sin is faithfully depicted, and we actually get some vision of God’s wrathful side in the promise to Abraham: “I will be kind to those who are kind to you. To the ones who are unkind, I will be unkind.” Jacob’s trick on Esau, the betrayal of Joseph by his brothers, the threat to Hebrew boys in Egypt, and the drowning of the Egyptians are all given due attention despite their ugliness. The gospel sections contain an unusually rich swath of Jesus’ teaching, the Lord’s Prayer has a helpful phrase-by-phrase explanation appended, and less common stories like Lazarus and the rich man find a place. The crucifixion is depicted by a long view of three crosses on a hillside, and Jesus’

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words to the thief on the cross and his “it is finished” are reported. In addition to a better array of prophets, *Spark* spends some time with the epistles, offering a short summary of Romans (with a strong statement of Jesus’ full humanity *and* divinity) along with two selections from 1 Corinthians and one each from Galatians and Philippians. Though that’s where it stops—no happy ending in Revelation this time around.

One last distinctive feature of *Spark* is the interpretive question or suggestion that concludes every story. Most of them are either a missional directive to share your faith in God or a prod to prayer. This helps cross the line from fiction into reality: it’s not just a

story you take in, but a story you speak out, too; it affects your life. Unfortunately, some of the suggestions are a little silly. “Using cooking oil, draw a cross on the foreheads of your family members to anoint them!” “Keep a small, smooth stone in your pocket. Touch it whenever you feel afraid. Remember that God is with you”—this right after David’s take-down of Goliath; one fears that children might get other ideas for the destiny of the small smooth stone.

The *Read and Learn Bible*, which gives thanks on its publication page to a biblical scholar who helped “ensure the accuracy of these adaptations of the biblical text,” is indeed the most faithful to the original in its prose, even while being intended for four- to seven-year-olds.¹⁰ Yet here again choices are made in the presentation of the material that carry their own commitments. For instance, in the creation story, we read: “And then He said, ‘Let Us make people in Our likeness, and let them rule over the fish and the birds and all other living creatures. So He made man.’” Given the explicit words of Genesis that God created people “male and female,” both fully in his image, this is as far off as *Spark*’s selective omission of Adam and Eve’s creation. Later on, the Egyptians are said to have given the Israelites gold and silver because “God had put sympathy in their hearts”! In the theophany to Abraham and Sarah, *Read and Learn* takes the liberty of saying that “[o]ne of the visitors was God and the other two were His angels,” and when Daniel interprets Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the statue of many metals, an explanatory notes tell us exactly which kingdom each layer refers to, right down to the Romans—a little burst of dispensationalism well beyond the parameters of the biblical text.

Usually the explanatory notes are much better: introducing common biblical words like “ark” or “clan,” or offering sound theological interpretations, as here: “Mercy means ‘kindness, undeserved or unexpected.’ It is also used to mean ‘forgiveness.’ Mercy

is a very important word in the Bible because it describes the way God treats all people.” Strikingly, Islam is mentioned twice (that Muslims consider themselves descendants of Abraham, along with Jews; and that the Ten Commandments are important “in the ethical systems of Judaism, Chris-

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tianity, and Islam”), suggesting a more conscious approach to mission. Two of the notes deal with ghosts. After the raising of Jairus’ daughter, we read: “When someone eats, it is a sign that they are alive. Ghosts do not eat, since they do not need food to survive.” The same explanation is offered when the risen Jesus deliberately eats in front of the disciples.

And, as usual, there is a mysterious selectivity in the choice of stories. We get the renaming of Jacob but not the wrestling with God that preceded it; Joseph’s success in Egypt but not his many years of suffering beforehand; the succession problem after Solomon but not the fact that he caused it or that the contenders were his own sons. But we do get four psalms, summarized, and a handful of proverbs; Solomon’s wisdom established through his recommendation of splitting the baby; exile in Babylon though not the destruction of the northern kingdom; and even the hanging of Haman (not illustrated). Besides Daniel and Jonah, the only prophet to get any coverage is Micah, who leads the way into the New Testament.

In that half there is, most unusually, a chapter on “Women Helpers”

based on Luke 8. We get the healing of man born blind but not the controversy it provokes among the Jews. The Last Supper is regrettably weak: “This bread and wine are part of me. Take them as a way of remembering me.” Like in *Spark*, the crucifixion is shown with a long view to the hilltop, and the final words of Jesus are to commend his spirit to the Father. We hear a couple of stories about Paul but no extracts from the epistles, and like in *Beginners’* we then jump abruptly to Revelation, where we are informed: “God will bless all who have done right. For them there will be no more death, suffering, crying, or pain. But those who have done evil will be thrown into a lake of burning fire.” The last part of the book contains “parent pages” written by a Lutheran youth educator, suggesting ways to use Bible stories to engage children in their faith.

As you can see, the various children’s Bibles come to different judgments about which unsavory aspects of the biblical narrative should be told and which shouldn’t (“temporary withholding”), as well as how the stories should be told or retold to engage and inspire a young audience (“selective mistranslation”). The most important common thread is the defense of God’s character: you won’t see anything in a children’s Bible that reflects poorly on Him, as for example in Amos 9:4 where the LORD says of Israel, “I will fix My eyes upon them for evil and not for good.”

But for reasons much less clear, the names of God are avoided, too. None of these three Bibles reports the revelation of God’s name I AM WHO I AM at the burning bush, even though that story is included in all three. In *Beginner’s* the Great Commission includes the charge to make disciples and baptize but not the trinitarian name; *Spark’s* version says to tell about Jesus but omits any mention of either baptism or the name¹¹; *Read and Learn* completely drops Matthew’s Great Commission and only alludes to the charge to teach and make disciples, without any mention of baptism or

the trinitarian name, either. So, missionaries withhold “Son of God” from Muslims in their Bibles; we withhold “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” from our children in *their* Bibles. There are important differences in these two cases, of course. Muslims are not to be treated as children in the patronizing sense. They are not even to be protected from what the Bible is saying: the withholding strategy exists only to open the possibility of conversation at all by removing an inevitable misunderstanding, which is not an issue for Christendom children. But we must acknowledge the common practice of addressing people where really they are in their initial encounters with Scripture.

Among the human figures in these children’s Bibles, there is a fair amount of variety in what is and isn’t considered acceptable. Note, though, that none of the following foundational Bible stories is included in any of the three: Cain and Abel; Hagar and Ishmael; Abraham and Isaac on Mt. Moriah; Jacob’s multiple wives; David and Bathsheba; Solomon’s betrayal of the Lord; the cry of dereliction; the stoning of Stephen. That is not necessarily to say that such withholding is a mistake. Little children are not ready to cope with the “hidden God” side of faith, and it’s hard to imagine what could come of their hearing the Abraham and Isaac story except a sudden paranoid fear of hiking trips with dad. But this is just the tip of the iceberg. For example, *Spark’s* “Teaching and Healing” story, based on Mark 1:21–28, portrays the man as “sick” rather than as having “an unclean spirit”: inaccurate, but how would you go about talking to your kids about demon possession? And then there is the eternal problem of the distinctly Jewish terminology and how it does or doesn’t apply to Jews today.

We all know intuitively that you just can’t present the unvarnished Bible to young children: it would be a disaster. But we tend not to take the gradual initiation into the full unsavoriness of the biblical narrative as a genu-

ine mission task. Small children have generally been regarded as inevitable Christians, the legitimate property of Christendom, who will be socialized into the faith by the cultural supports around them. This unfortunate attitude is proven from the flip side by how children's ministries have traditionally been held in lower regard than adult ones. Churches steadfastly opposed to female ordination have seen no problem with entrusting the instruction of youngsters in Sunday School to women—usually denied any advanced education to equip them for the task—thus proving that what happens with the children there isn't *really* church, doesn't *really* count. Many paid youth workers in the churches today are not ordained, again since their ministry isn't *really* "the" ministry; and even ordained youth pastors are generally paid less than *real* pastors and are expected, eventually, to grow out of it. And then we wonder at our poor retention rate when children reach adulthood!¹² How much better if we acknowledged intergenerational mission to be as legitimate and serious a fulfillment of the Great Commission as international mission and honored youth workers accordingly.

It should be noted, by way of conclusion, that mission is never a one-way street. Missionaries often find in the very act of evangelization that their own conceptions of the faith are incomplete or distorted, and so they end up becoming students of the very people they went to teach. It is no different in the mission to children and youth. And it is no mistake that they are held up as examples in the Scriptures: Jesus thanks the Father for concealing things from the wise and revealing them to little children instead (Matthew 11:25) and teaches that whoever humbles himself like a little child will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:4). Children ask questions about the faith that adults have long since forgotten and offer answers that have a remarkable way of cutting the crap. Age is no limit to testimony: John the Baptist

was leaping for joy at the advent of the Messiah while still in his mother's womb.

Now that we've established the omnipresence of the two mission practices of "selective mistranslation" and "temporary withholding" in the most basic and taken-for-granted of church ministries, we'll turn to two more cases, the first where explicit adoption of "selective mistranslation" could do a great deal of good, and the second where it is high time to leave "temporary withholding" behind.

Feminism and "Selective Mistranslation"

I should begin here autobiographically. I have tended to view most feminist theology as a set of dogmatic revisions to historic Christian orthodoxy, and as such I have failed to find it convincing or desirable. More seriously, I eventually came to the conclusion that the predominant forms of feminist theology actually undercut their own best insights, and I have documented the disturbing convergence of the most radical feminist theology with the most conservative misogynistic theology in their shared heterodox presuppositions.¹³ My judgment on these issues, in the realm of dogmatics, has largely been shared by the leading Lutheran theologians of past decades (Robert Jenson being one among many).

However, though I still find most feminist theology to be dogmatically faulty, I have more recently come to realize that engaging it chiefly as a dogmatic challenge misses the point. Again, I must be personal here. After a long time I have finally begun to see the connection between feminist critiques of Christian theology and the epidemic of sexual violence against women, from verbal undermining of their humanity all the way to rape.

I have had countless female friends (and a few male ones, too) reveal to me the stories of their abuse, and the numbers seem to be growing. I'm not quite sure why the confessions are coming faster and thicker now.

My suspicion is that, as I have begun to think and talk more openly about sexual abuse, I have inadvertently signaled that I am a "safe" person, that I will not respond with "you asked for it" or "that couldn't have happened, nobody would do such a thing." I'm sure it helps that I'm a woman myself; I can well imagine that victims of male sexual aggression would not be much inclined to share their experiences with other men, however kindly. I have to admit that I used to find statistics on sexual violence hard to believe, especially because of the margin of error suggested by "underreporting." Now I find them completely plausible. In only one of the many cases I've been told about was the crime reported and prosecuted—and in that case the perpetrator was acquitted. Nice sheltered people, including those on juries, have a hard time believing that men (it is

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mostly though not exclusively men) could really do such a thing. But some men do. More than you think.

Therefore, I have been trying to shift my thinking about feminist challenges from a dogmatic approach to a missional one. Consider for a moment George Lindbeck's famous example in *The Nature of Doctrine* of the Crusader

who cries “Jesus is Lord!” as he lops off a Saracen’s head. It *is* true that Jesus is Lord. But it is *not* true that Jesus is Lord the way the Crusader thinks he is. His actions belie his statement; in a certain sense, they even falsify it. For another example, in C. S. Lewis’s final installment of the Chronicles of Narnia, *The Last Battle*, the dwarves—who are clearly meant to be a figure of the Jews—become sarcastic and derisive when they hear, one time too many, that Aslan is “not a tame lion.” That may be true, but it has ceased to be a meaningful statement to them: instead it smacks of an ideology intended to deceive them and cause them more suffering.

Now, on analogy to these two cases, imagine a woman who has been sexually abused and emotionally humiliated by her father, turning to the church for solace, and then being informed that God is her Father. It *is* true that God is her Father. It is *not* true that God is a Father like her earthly father. If anything, God’s Fatherhood is a wrathful indictment of her earthly father’s fatherhood. “Father” as a name for God is not a straightforward metaphor: when Jesus says in Matthew 23:9 to “call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven,” he breaks the link that our metaphorical imaginations naturally make and forbids any ontology of being. In short, you can’t get to knowledge of the heavenly Father via an earthly father. But it is unlikely that an abused woman will hear such nuances in the usual course of Sunday worship. Quite the contrary, it is easy to imagine—because it has so often happened—that a clever abuser would warp biblical language about fatherhood to justify or conceal his evil behavior. The misuse of Scripture to authorize male exploitation of women is the source from which feminist theology springs. There will be no resolution, and there shouldn’t be, until we face up to our vast collusion in keeping silent about sexual abuse, even (especially?) within our churches. Ignorance is no excuse anymore.

Realizing this does not automatically translate into any obvious and permanent change in practice. It calls for experimentation, improvisation, the provisionality of mission efforts. We can’t avoid the fact that the New Testament constantly confesses God with the word “Father,” and anyway stamping out one problematic term is only going to cause another to crop up in its place—which is why the dogmatic approach to these problems is

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ultimately not the right one.¹⁴ Suppose, instead, that we took women, even North American women socialized into Christianity from childhood, as legitimate objects of mission, legitimate as Muslims on the other side of the globe. That would mean relinquishing the unspoken assumption that they *ought* to get it already, that they should unproblematically distinguish the good heavenly Father from the evil earthly father (or other male

evildoers), because they are already in Christendom territory. This tacit assumption makes it nearly impossible to see women’s questions and fears as fair ones and that addressing them is the precise mission task to which the Spirit calls the church. If Muslims can be spared the initial offense of “Son of God,” and if children can be spared the initial shock of enormous portions of the Bible, can abused women not be spared the initial trauma of Father language until they have experienced some measure of healing through the gospel itself? In no case do we want to prevent growth “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13). Eventually, Muslims need to know what Son of God means rightly and come to terms with it; eventually, children need to learn the troubling truth of the Bible; eventually, women need to be reconciled to the gracious God Who wants to be known as Father. But we cannot and should not force them to begin at the end.

Additionally, we should remember that diaconal service has long been the proving ground for mission. Missionaries have cared for the sick, built schools, codified languages, and fed the hungry as real-world proof of the love of Jesus Christ. Thus diakonia is one of right ways to respond to the feminist challenge, even if said feminists are “only” fellow North Americans. In a case like abortion, for example, the secular and feminist parties will never be persuaded of the genuine Christian conviction about the value of the fetus—they will only see it as repressive sexual control of women—until Christians, at personal cost and self-sacrifice, put their financial and emotional resources toward supporting the abandoned, poor, criticized, ostracized, and desperate women who seek abortions; until Christians make it publicly known that they will gladly commit to the open adoption of any child whose mother cannot see to its upbringing. Criticizing only the final immoral act in a long chain of immoral acts, so that the burden falls on the

mother but the father escapes without even a slap on the wrist, is a false testimony to our faith. Or, for another possibility, imagine the church leading the way in a national conversation about sexual abuse instead of sending the silent message that “it doesn’t happen here,” though of course it does, and certainly not only in the case of Catholic priests. Unless we embody the love of the Father, our criticisms of feminist alternatives will only make us look like Crusaders spouting our piety while beheading the enemy.

As with children, this kind of mission will not be a one-way street, either. Feminists have rightly called attention to matters that the “orthodox” have sleepily overlooked. They are right to insist that the tolerance of male abuse of women is of dire doctrinal and ethical import for Christians. They are right to insist that we do not call the first person of the Trinity “Father” because He is ontologically male or masculine; that is the preserve of Baal. They are right to demonstrate the manifold ways the true humanity of women has been called into question and to alert us to the “selective mis-translation” of referring to collective humanity as “man.” They are right to raise questions about the implications for soteriology of excluding women from church office. It is high time for a renewed conversation about these issues, mediated by mission.

*Liturgy, Lectionary, and
“Temporary Withholding”*

An ever-present danger of missionary experimentation is that the experiment itself becomes reified. The liturgy is *the* preeminent case where “temporary withholding” has inadvertently become permanent because of a reified experiment. The rationale behind the liturgy is to give voice to a wide swath of biblical language to shape the worshippers and direct their praises. It socializes people into a particular culture of Christianity and through its repetition embeds in their minds and hearts both words

and music that can come to their aid in the living of the Christian life outside the setting of Sunday worship. It assures that the basics of the faith are known and guards against cheapened or heretical versions of the gospel at the whim of an ignorant or misguided leadership.¹⁵ The fact that it is assumed to be ancient and universal (though this is factually untrue¹⁶) only adds to the liturgy’s appeal, at least among Westerners in mobile, industrial societies.

The liturgy is most often linked to a lectionary of some kind or another, whether of the former one-year or the more recent three-year variety. Again, the purposes are clear: offering a representative swath of the Bible

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that more or less follows the pattern of the church year, making sure the people hear the basics, and preventing preachers from imposing their own “temporary withholding” on the congregation by expositing only their favorites. In short, a liturgy and a lectionary that have wide currency across barriers of time, space, and language intend to ensure the catholicity of the congregation’s worship, the fullness of the gospel message and biblical story. So far, so good.

But it doesn’t take much more than a cursory examination to realize how much is withheld from the congregation in the liturgy and lectionary all the same. The conventional weekly liturgy doesn’t include the Ten Commandments, the Great Commission, John 3:16, or Romans 3:28, even though

the Christian faith is unimaginable without these texts. Can Christians fully understand their faith without knowing that “in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1)? that “he was pierced for our transgressions... and with his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5)? that “God is love” (I John 4:8)? Surely not—but we have no principled objection to weekly liturgies that omit these critical passages. The lectionary, for its part, even the three-year version, is far from comprehensive. As an experiment, get an old Bible and highlight everything you could possibly hear in the course of the three years, including the later weeks of Epiphany and Pentecost that often get cut short; then you’ll see how much is left out. But it’s very hard to make sense of either Old Testament history or the logic of any of the New Testament epistles through brief and selective snippets. The only opportunities to hear Acts are in the Easter season (supercessionistically replacing the Old Testament lesson) and on the Baptism of our Lord, if it is observed, and in no year do we get anything past Acts 17. Indeed, we withhold a great deal from our Christians.

Obviously, you can’t do everything all at once, and some selection has to be made. But it is worth asking whether the selections made by the liturgy and the lectionary have to be the *final* selections, repeated forever after. Is our loyalty to them mere habit, an ornery objection to perceived consumerist entertainment worship strategies, a last-ditch effort at some kind of trans-local unity, an “if it was good enough for my ancestors it’s good enough for me” stubbornness? These are hardly evangelical reasons. The implicit pedagogy of repetition in liturgy and lectionary invites reconsideration, too. A certain amount is necessary to make things stick, but I’m sure we’ve all had the experience of being inured to the Lord’s Prayer (for example) after so many years of recitation. And how do we reckon with the boredom of preachers and congregants, some of

whom have preached or heard sermons on the same three-year cycle of texts, in the same configurations, for almost forty years now? The repetition strategy favors infrequent visitors (often wishing to be assured that in church, at least, nothing ever changes) over the regulars—itsself perhaps a mission strategy, but not necessarily the best one. On top of this is the subtle suggestion that the rest of the Bible isn't really worth knowing, since we don't make time for it in worship, or that it is the domain of overachievers who go to Bible studies in their spare time. But if we believe that the Scripture is the source and norm of our faith—if we believe it such that we wish to enact it and not just give lip service to it—then our worship should create passion toward the Scripture, not boredom or indifference.

Most Lutheran congregations are not going to be willing to throw over the conventional liturgy, at least not until a serious alternative, neither cheap nor obscure, is offered to them. Until (and if) this happens, the time is ripe for gospel experimentation around the edges. There are already lots of resources out there for lectionary alternatives, from single-book preaching to topical preaching to Narrative Lectionary preaching.¹⁷ The liturgy can be expanded by the use of alternate biblical canticles; a practically unknown treasure trove is to be found in the LBW, including “Keep in Mind That Jesus Christ Has Died for Us” from II Timothy 2 and the very moving “I Will Sing the Story of Your Love” from Psalm 89 and Jeremiah 33. Taizé chants, often based on a single biblical verse, are already familiar and integrate easily into pre-existing liturgies. In the run-up to 2017, we can hardly do better than praying our way through the eerily beautiful Litany. And the extreme laity/clergy divide could be gently dismantled by cultivating testimonials in worship, in which parishioners share the biblical passages that have meant the most to them and why.

If you're in the mood for some

really edgy experimentation, here's what I'd suggest. Since the Old Testament gets the shortest shrift in our liturgy and lectionary—and since we are constantly fighting against the popular perception that different “Gods” are at work in each Testament—I'd like to see the introduction of the festival observance of Old Testament events. Not a single “mighty work of God” (Acts 2:11) from the Old Testament gets commemorated and celebrated in the liturgical year of the church; the closest we get is Maundy Thursday's

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connection to Passover and our Pentecost displacing the Jews'. Undoubtedly the origins of this lie in the growing estrangement and need for differentiation between Jews and Christians in the early centuries of the church. It is clear enough, though, how that has borne some particularly vile fruit, coming to an apex in the last century. Rejoicing in the same mighty acts of God as our Jewish cousins might remind us more vividly of our engrafting into Israel and that our New Testament makes no sense whatsoever apart from the Old Testament.

Of course, this would require some sensitive handling. It's possible that simply adopting Jewish festivals (not all of which are commemorations of “mighty acts” anyway) would cause more friction than friendship; I have to admit that Christian Passover seders have always given me the willies. Steering clear of the christologically fraught holidays in favor of ones that Christians could more easily share—such as Purim, based on Esther, celebrating the deliverance of the Jews from genocide; Tu Bishvat, a celebration of trees and fruit tithes with Pass-

over undertones, which could inject some substance into our weak efforts at ecological awareness; or certain aspects of Shavuot, known to us by its Hellenistic Jewish name Pentecost, which celebrates the giving of the Ten Commandments and includes the reading of the Book of Ruth—could possibly work. But it may also be that a more modest development of particularly Christian ways of celebrating Old Testament events is the wiser approach. At a minimum, I would like to celebrate Ezekiel's vision of the resurrection of the dead bones and the call of Abraham and Sarah to be a blessing to the nations.

The point here, as throughout this essay, is that experiments in gospel translation are necessary and legitimate missional acts. The best experiments in gospel translation meet us where we are but then draw us beyond our starting points. “Temporary withholding” of parts of the Scripture serves its purpose, but as with “selective mistranslation,” at some point the strategy needs to come to an end. We will be better missionaries at home and abroad when we recognize openly the role of these two mission practices and reflect deliberately about when to use them and when to lay them aside.

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Notes

1. See “Experiments in Gospel Translation, Part 1,” *Lutheran Forum* 46/1 (Spring 2012): 5–9.

2. In this half of the essay, as in the first half, I wish to express my thanks to John G. Flett for his insights and suggestions.

3. I gained renewed conviction about this while singing an archaic translation of “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded” on Good Friday, which included the line, “Can death thy bloom deflower?”

4. Nothing has driven this point home more effectively to me than Timothy Brook's *Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World* (London: Profile, 2009), where he documents the mutual fascination and influence through trade between the Netherlands and the Far East. We learn as much about a culture by what it selects and transforms from outside influences as from what it generates on its own.

5. A biting parody of this tendency is

found in Robertson Davies's novel *Fifth Business*, in which a staggeringly wealthy man reports his joy at finding an interpretation of Christianity that finally makes sense to him: "...Christ was really a very distinguished person, a Prince of the House of David, a poet and an intellectual. Of course He was a carpenter; all those Jews in Bible days could do something with their hands. But what kind of a carpenter was he? Not making cowsheds, I'll bet. Undoubtedly a designer and a manufacturer, in terms of those days. Otherwise, how did He make his connections? You know, when He was travelling around, staying with all kinds of rich and influential people as an honoured guest—obviously He wasn't just bumming his way through Palestine; He was staying with people who knew Him as a man of substance who also had a great philosophy. You know, the way those Orientals make their pile before they go in for philosophy. And look how He appreciated beauty! When that woman poured the ointment on His feet, He knew good ointment from bad, you can bet. And the Marriage at Cana—a party, and He helped the host out of a tight place when the drinks gave out, because He had probably been in the same fix Himself in His days in business and knew what social embarrassment was. And an economist! Driving the money-changers out of the Temple—why? Because they were soaking the pilgrims extortionate rates, that's why, and endangering a very necessary tourist attraction and rocking the economic boat. It was a kind of market discipline, and He was the only one with the brains to see it and the guts to do something about it." Robertson Davies, *The Deptford Trilogy: Fifth Business, The Manticore, World of Wonders* (London: Penguin, 1990), 115–16.

6. One of the most important breakthroughs of the Second Vatican Council was the insight that the same Christian truth can be expressed in multiple ways: "Thus if, in various times and circumstances, there have been deficiencies in moral conduct or in church discipline, or even in the way that church teaching has been formulated—to be carefully distinguished from the deposit of faith itself—these can and should be set right at the opportune moment" (Decree on Ecumenism, §6). The insight came to fruition in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification: "The understanding of the doctrine of justification set forth in this Declaration shows that a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification exists between Lutherans and Catholics. In light of this consensus the remaining differences of language, theological

elaboration, and emphasis in the understanding of justification described in paras. 18 to 39 are acceptable. Therefore the Lutheran and the Catholic explications of justification are in their difference open to one another and do not destroy the consensus regarding the basic truths" (§5.40). I doubt very much whether either church could have acknowledged this insight without many decades, even centuries of cross-cultural mission work behind them.

7. Most children's Bibles leave a lot to be desired in this regard, which itself reflects our changing mission situation. It is true that the need for the inculturation of the gospel means that depicting biblical figures in the racial form of the community is legitimate, whether that community is European or African or Asian. But arguably, in increasingly pluralist North American society, children's Bibles with white-only characters fail to commend the Bible's own message of the gospel for all nations and proclaim that European ethnicity = Christian. Probably white American children have more need to learn that Jesus was brown, and that non-white people are OK too, than that their own whiteness is valued. *The Beginner's Bible* depicts Jesus and the other main characters as just a shade darker than the whitest people, but you'd really have to be looking to notice that Jesus is not supposed to be white. I was a little disturbed that in Jacob's dream all the angels are white, although in the visit to the shepherds they are of various races. *Spark Story Bible* consistently portrays all the characters in shades of brown; in this regard it is most commendably attentive to historical accuracy. *Read and Learn Bible* has a more brown Jesus and disciples than *Beginner's*, though you probably wouldn't notice unless you were really looking for it, and most of the figures have brown hair. One thing to note in reviewing illustrations for racial breadth is that white people generally prefer a majority of light-skinned figures with a smattering of other colors thrown in to prove their commitment to diversity. A minority of white people is never liked by white people.

8. *The Beginner's Bible: Timeless Bible Stories* (Franklin: Mission City Press, 2005). The publication information page mentions "theological review" by someone with an M.Div. from Fuller Theological Seminary. The publisher's website includes a typical evangelical Protestant statement of faith, available at www.thebeginnersbible.com/about-beginnersbible.php (accessed April 15, 2012).

9. *Spark Story Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009). It was developed by an ecumenical division of Augsburg Fortress called

Sparkhouse (wearesparkhouse.org). Many contributors are listed though none is specifically identified as a theological consultant.

10. *Read and Learn Bible* (New York: Scholastic, 2010). It was produced in partnership with the American Bible Society and drew its language from the Contemporary English Version and the King James Version.

11. Oddly, the trinitarian name *is* invoked at Lydia's baptism in Acts—though it seems much more likely that Lydia would have been baptized in the name of Jesus, the standard method in Acts. This is the one time in *Spark* the name appears; it doesn't at all in the other two.

12. This unfortunate attitude toward youth and children's ministries can be seen in other parts of the world as well. On how these issues are being treated in a post-socialist context, see Michal Valčo, "Cultural Challenges and Future Hopes of Christian Church in Slovakia," in *V službe obnovy* [In the Service of Renewal] (Bratislava: Evangelická Bohoslovecká Fakulta Univerzity Komenského, 2010), 116–23.

13. See my article "Tradition, Priesthood, and Personhood in the Trinitarian Theology of Elisabeth Behr-Sigel," *Pro Ecclesia* 19/2 (2010): 129–50.

14. One experimental possibility for selective mistranslation where Father is concerned is to encourage abused women in their prayers to call upon God by the name He revealed to Moses in Exodus, I AM WHO I AM. This is truly God's name, as the Scripture assures us, a name by which He is to be known through all generations (Exodus 3:14–15).

15. For a general overview of liturgical theology, see Katarína Valčová, *Chapters in Practical Theology* (Žilina: University of Žilina, 2008), 7–9.

16. Twentieth-century liturgical scholars put the emphasis on similarity and universality in Christian liturgies. More recent assessments have been forced to acknowledge the extraordinary diversity from the earliest years of the church. See my review of *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts, and Seasons in Early Christianity* by Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, an overview of the most current conclusions of liturgical research, at www.lutheranforum.org/book-reviews/review-of-feasts-fasts-and-seasons-in-early-christianity/.

17. See Rolf A. Jacobson, "The Narrative Lectionary," *Lutheran Forum* 46/1 (Spring 2012): 24–26 or www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_lectionary.aspx.