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THE “HABITUAL BE”

Linguists today remark on a peculiarity of regional dialect, regularly heard in the islands of the Caribbean and in our own inner cities, which they identify as the "habitual be." It occurs when a speaker uses the verb "to be" in a unique way, as in the locution, "I be going to church on Sunday..."

The "be" in this construction is not so much a mistake in grammar as a new possibility in speech, never before available to us, and means to suggest an habitual action. "I be going to church..." here means: "I go to church habitually, over and over again, every Sunday." The construction thus represents an enrichment in our marvellously fluid and flexible English language, saying something that could not be said otherwise. The moral: Give thanks often and regularly for our magnificent mother tongue!

Now, these things are also a parable. Well-meaning pastors sometimes change the words of the Salutation formula in the Holy Communion from "The Lord be with you" to "The Lord is with you", in an attempt to make the liturgy more relevant to moderns. You can admire the instinct – to make our worship more transparent, more accessible to contemporary pieties. But I say: "Hold on! Not so fast." There's another way to make worship relevant. Teach your people about the "habitual be".

Of course, the Salutation formula is a product of the early church. And in the Latin, from which our words in worship are often derived, there's no verb at all: "*Dominus vobiscum*": literally "The Lord, with you."

But what if it were the "habitual be" at work in a liturgical formula such as "The Lord be with you"? It surely isn't. (See above.) But if we taught our people to understand this lovely greeting as an instance of the "habitual be," then no amount of tampering can improve it. "The Lord is with you, habitually, constantly, uninterruptedly, over and over again."

My best advice: Leave the traditional words of the classic liturgy as is, and teach your

people about the "habitual be." You'd be cheating, in a sense: The "habitual be" is a late Twentieth Century enrichment to our language. But ain't it grand? And ain't it useful?



A Preview: Next month in this space I'll begin a new series, a serialized revision of my first book, *A Worship Workbench*, originally published in July, 1972 (WW '72), by National Lutheran Campus Ministry in USA and Canada, and reprinted no fewer than five times by that agency, the last reprinting in August of 1983. I've re-read it recently, and I think it still holds up, after these thirty-some years. It covers to be sure some ground I've touched on since in Essays in this *Lift Up your Hearts* website, but it also includes some issues I've not heretofore addressed in these electronic pages.

Yes, these Internet Essays take their title from that earlier book – I hold the copyright, as author – and I like to think these electronic reflections at *LUYH* continue the dialogue with Church and World which I began a full generation ago in hard copy. I think you'll find something to chew on in the Essays which follow. I'll take the liberty to revise or expand my 1972 observations and reflections, if that seems prudent to me. And I'll reserve the right to interrupt my own serialized revision on occasion with an Essay on an unrelated topic that I feel cries out to be addressed.

So as to keep from confusing you, I'll prefix each title in the serialized revision of my 1972 volume with the abbreviation "WW '72" for "*Worship Workbench '72*". If you print out all subsequent Essays that bear that prefix, you'll end with an updated revision of my original 1972 volume.

And if you're an old timer and remember the hard copy original, with fondness or with fury, I'm happy to welcome you once again into a lively conversation!

