What are we to preach, now?

A Bible study for presentation & discussion at Craigville Theological Colloquy 19, 7.15-19.02 on **1 Thessalonians 1**

Sisters & brothers,
when I asked Marva Dawn to suggest, for these Bible studies, texts that would support her lectures, she asked only that I lay off texts *she* intends to exposit, & I have done so--bearing in mind that this Colloquy's theme is "Christian Worship and Witness in Our Times," & that the suggested pre-Colloquy questions were these: *1: How does the [liturgical] confession 'Christ Will Come Again' affect the way the church lives and worships now? 2: Should the events of September 11, 2001, affect what we do in worhsip? 3: Is Christian worship and witness for all people? 4: How can the arts assist or impede genuine worship? 5: How do worhsip and witness interrelate?*

One further introductory note: These three Bible studies are briefly oral & in detail written. The written form will be available after each presentation & will continue to be available throughout the Colloquy.

Now let us listen for the Word of God through the NT's earliest chapter, 1 Thessalonians 1: (See the "WORKSHEET on 1 Thessalonians 1 NRSV.")
...Why a Worksheet? To keep our attention on the text in these brief Colloquy Bible periods, & to encourage you to "work" on what in the text "works for you" and perhaps "works you up" enough to stir you to ask a question. Secondarily, it provides some space for note-taking--but don't be anxious about: what you might want to take a note on you may find in the session's Thinksheet.

Before I get into the text, I want to say something practical; I want to give you a five-finger exercise you can use in Bible study for yourself & for all ages down to & including junior highs. First, a running start. We remember the year 1620 for both "Novus Ordo Seclorum" (the Mayflower) & "Novum Organun Scientiarum," Francis Bacon's creation of the scientific method of inductive reasoning, the essential tool of what became the Enlightenment ("modernity"). Toward the end of the 19th c., two Yale professors adapted Bacon to Bible study & called their creation "inductive Bible study." In 1893, one of them became the first president of the U. of Chicago; & seven years later the other started what is now New York Theological Seminary, called the Biblical Seminary of NY when in 1937 under its Howard Tillman Kuist I had my first seminary course in hermeneutics...

...which included the aforementioned exercise. "Authors reveal their point of view by their relative stress on or neglect of persons/times/ideas/events/places." The three middle words spell "tie," so tie them together, separating the thumb (the first letter P, "persons") from the little finger (the second letter P, "places"). Now use your fingers to data-gather, the first stage in inductive reasoning.

Sounds simple? It is, but also as complex as you want to go deep & wide. Try it on 1Thes.1. Spread out on paper the data in the five categories; ask What is here & Why, & What is not here & Why not? Then ask What is the mood of this passage, Can I enter into that mood--& if I can, & do, Will the Word speak to me/us through the words? (I.e., Am I open to hearing the Word through the words?) I'm tempted to use the five fingers as the spine of my brief exposition of 1Thes.1, but I leave that work to you after you've experienced our time together on this text.

Noted news-photographer Harry Benson, asked how he did it, said "I got myself a camera & put it in an interesting position &--click!--clicked." Well, what I'm clicking on for this session is the end of our text, 9b-10, which lays out the loci of the earliest Christian witnessing/preaching, to which I invite you to think with me about some analogs in our witnessing/preaching: What are we to preach, now?--if it is to be Christian--must stand under the judgment & guidance of What did they witness/preach then?

THE SITUATION It's about 20 years since Jesus' resurrection, & Paul in Corinth is writing to the church he & his two companions recently founded in Thessalonica. Few yids were converted; but after the goys joined with enthusiasm & in numbers, the Jews tried to undermine Paul, finally driving him out of town & in his absence persecuting the fledgling church. Says Paul, Hold on in faith, love, & hope!

Elliott Thinksheets
309 Lake Elizabeth Drive
Craigville, MA 02632
Phone/Fax 508.775.8008 $20 per year
e-mail: wandielliott@attbi.com

Noncommercial reproduction permitted

6.15.02

3120

THE EXPOSITION/APPLICATION Quick comments on vv.1-9a: 1 "In" identifies which assembly (ecclesia), among the various cults & societies within the sphere of the civil assembly, the government of the (Greek) polis within the (Roman) empire. The control-titles are "Father" &, for Jesus, "Lord" (the "kurios" title also of the mayor, the governor, & the emperor; but, more deeply, of YHWH [the Hebrew-Jewish deity] in the LXX, "the King James [Greek] Bible" of the Hellenistic Jews & their gentile converts).....2 "Thanks to God" for the Thes. church is the tonic, the mood tone, of this affection letter--Paul's most affectionate letters being his first (this, ca.AD 51 CE) & his last (Philippians). "Always" & "constantly" are iterative, referring to the trio's prayer-times....3 Faith/love/hope, the primary colors (cardinal virtues) of the Christian character (as in end of 1Cor.13). Not paralyzed by fear, they were energized by faith; love transformed their attitudes, speech, & service; & through their steadying hope in Christ they received the courage to be, to do, & to endure. Flattery? Rather, Paul chose to view them at their best & encourage them toward the best (the model for "Mr. Roger's Neighborhood")....4 God's election/choice of them, as evidenced by their Christian character & the personal & communal fruits of their Christian action, was the reason for Paul's joyful-prayerful thanksgiving, counsel, & incitement....5 Holy Spirit power through the preachers' "full conviction" & integrity....6 More evidence of God's call/election: joy keeps ahead of suffering affliction as they follow, & become, models of the Good News....7 "An example" (tupos) of life & work rather than of faith (doctrine) & order (church polity): too early for the latter two....8 The Thes. church as good news for the Good News, the gospel (here, "the word of the Lord")....9a The Greek Thessalonians' eager welcome of Paul, Silas, & Timothy.

Which brings us to the loci, the **common elements**, of Christian witnessing/preaching as we have it here in the earliest written attestation of it; & some present analogs. The text (9b-10) presents in reverse order; here's the action-order:

1 **The PROBLEM** The human condition is so wayward from the human potential that sensitive souls fear, & warn of, oncoming appropriate consequences, "the wrath that is coming" (9/11 was the wrath that came), impending punishment, either by impersonal reflex (a Greek sanction) or by personal judgment (the Jewish sanction, the biblical deity having the full emotional range ["the wrath" being an ellipsis for "the wrath of God"]). The postmodern fancy that the moral sense is only a social construction cannot hold out, for it cannot hold onto the human data of dream, dread, & doom. The Thessalonian culture was dismally similar to our own: consumerist-materialist, bodily & spiritually narcissist, aimless, anxious. And the apostolic Kerygma, the Message, included along with announcing the Good News (go-spel), the bad news of denouncing sin (so, in the Acts parallel [17.1-9], the mob shouts "These men have caused trouble everywhere!").

2 **The PROVISION** The Loving, Wrathful One has provided "the Rescuer" (same vb. as "deliver" in the Lord's Prayer), Jesus "his Son..., whom he raised from the dead" (the Cross implied; stated in Paul's sketch of the Kerygma as he "recieved it" [1Cor.15.3-26]). Against moral weakness, spiritual ennui, & societal corruption--against evil & sin--the resurrection is the freeing power of the future released in the present through a past event of timeless potency, God's dark gift of new life for us through his self-sacrifice.

3 **The PROCESS** For a pagan multitude in Thes., including "many...leading women" (Ac.17.4), the Christian Kerygma won the elpidomachy, the war of hopes: while there's life there's hope, yes; but *this* is neither confined within the human heart now nor limited to this life. How to access it? You have to want it enough to "turn" 180° (Heb."teshuvah"; Gk."epi-streph."; Lat."con-versio"). Turn from death-dealing & phantasmal idols to the only One worthy of worship, the "life-giving & authentic" God, whose "slave" you are thenceforth to be as you "wait for his Son from heaven." Right worship, right witness, right vision of the world to come. The Thes. church was *too* future-oriented, & Paul's letters to it are meant to serve as correctives. He would tell us to take in full seriousness all three lines in the liturgy: "Christ died, Christ is risen, *Christ will come again.*" But he warns us against overreading the last line. The future has a face & a name, Jesus, to whom Muhammad (& everybody else) will bow (Phil.2.10-11).