

DISCIPLINED READING

Two purposes as I begin this Thinksheet: (1) To encourage you to consider joining the Confessing Christ email meeting (if you're not already on) & (2) To reproduce my yesterday's letter (on which I'd had responses before 8am today):

From: "Willis Elliott"
To: <confessingchrist@yahoo.com>
Sent: Monday, August 27, 2001 7:26 AM
Subject: Newspapers
Dear Meeters—

Yesterday, knowing a pastor's studyweek to be on imagination, I suggested he read in that day's NYT BOOK REVIEW a splendid article titled "Don't mess with Aslan." HarperCollins, hoping for wider spread & to avoid offense to unbelievers & maybe even to promote the secularistic mentality, has advertised its new edition of the Narnia tales as nonreligious. Rightly, the author says Narnia could not be more Christian.

"But," said the pastor, "I don't get the TIMES." "No problem," said I, "nor do I; I read it on the Net." "How?" nyt.com

Remember that White House pic of JFK's daily walk down a long shelf of newspapers?

No more. Now you can more swiftly, & for no \$, explore daily any number of the firstline papers. Here's my list:

nyt.com

washingtonpost.com

bostonglobe.com, then click "Online"

csmonitor.com

The only paper I read in paper form is Cape Cod's only daily, CAPE COD TIMES.

"How long does all that take you?" he asked. "An hour: *headlines, editorials, op-eds, letters, books. Your browsing skill increases." And, as I used to tell my NYTheolog.Seminary students, "Learn to pray the newspapers."

*Cable

Grace and peace.

Willis

1 A Christian's daily spiritual disciplines--formerly known as "godly routine"--depend on (1) degree of Christian commitment, (2) life situation, (3) life stage. Retirees (me, e.g.) should not set themselves up, here, as models for the "workers of the world" whom the Wobblies called on to unite: at earlier stages of my life I could not take my present two hours daily for disciplined reading & spiritual exercises. Situation? We (you & I) are privileged: we can read, have access to a wide range of reading materials, & have enough leisure for at least some disciplined reading. (My prayers include the "anawim" I read about today--the 1st wd. in Ps.37.11, trd. in TANAKH as "the lowly," who as this Ps. & Jesus say, "shall inherit the land." One was Mel Brooks' mama: a dozen kids & a mountain of laundry. I heard him say that one day she piled the mountain in the middle of the backyard, poured on it a can of lighter fluid, lit it, & in a loud voice said "I hate laundry!" She was a faithful Catholic, & the Lord [her church said] gave her that round dozen of laundry-making offspring.)

2 Where does prayer come in? Before any reading (& usually before rising) I say some formal prayers ("In the name of...", "Glory be to..."), then pray the UCC Statement of Faith (not any version thereof). Prayer then pervades the newspaper reading. NOTE on a detail of my NYTS students' praying the papers: occasionally I would assign the writing of prayers opposite articles, at the next class session the students reading aloud each prayer after a brief description of its article. I used this message across the range of our offerings, from store-front to doctoral....Myself, how can I get five newspapers both read & prayed in only one hour? I believe the Holy Spirit calls us to pray as the world enters our eyes, our minds, our hearts. As for the quantity read, I am a good (selective) reader, not a speed reader. *Almost nothing in the papers is worth a Christian's thorough reading.* But we cannot expect the Spirit to grab our attention for anything we've not paid attention to: swiftly surveying (as I said in the email [above]) "headlines, editorials, op-eds, letters, books" I consider necessary to spiritual openness.

3 And **prayer**, as meditational prayer, pervades also the day's 2nd hour, sometimes penetrated by the 1st hour: the world intrudes not to interrupt prayer but to be prayed for. (Yes: like the pastor in the email [above], you may prefer to keep the world out till you've prayed. I too, sometimes; seldom now, usually at some earlier life stages.) The process?

...OT, as in §1 (above). Continuous reading in Hebrew/Aramaic, feeling-thinking the words as I go--then checking the great contemporary Jewish translation, TANAKH (Jew.Pub.Soc./85); + perhaps THE TORAH: A Modern Commentary [Union of Am.Heb.Congregations]). If you can't read the OT,* check your favorite translations with TANAKH. Every translation is a regurgitation (as some animals feeding their very young), but much can be learned by comparing regurgitations.

And please don't call it "Hebrew Scriptures," which I see often in liturgies on the line above "New Testament," which should be "Christian Scriptures" to parallel "Hebrew Scriptures"! Marcion (ca.AD140CE) & the Nazis (AD1933-45CE) drove an antiJewish wedge between OT & NT, destroying the covenantal ("testament") bridge. Jews resent "OT"? Since they resent "NT" even more, how come many liberal clergy continue to use the latter after dumping the former? Further, "Christian Scriptures" includes the OT (LXX, in which the Jews translated "almah" by Gk. for "virgin," instead of using any of a half dozen Gk. wds. for "girl" or "young woman" [NRSV Is.7.14]). Oh, what a tangled web those weave who mess with the Christian language in bungled efforts to be kind to Jews & women!

...NT (Greek/Latin parallel, currently finish with Jörg Zink's German translation). If you can't read the NT,* intercheck your favorite translations. (Pre WWII, we were taught in seminary never to preach on a text without having read it, it itself --not just translations of it. Last Sunday, I heard a seminary prof. of NT preach on a text without having read it; who thanked me when I pointed out that the text's grasp of him would have given his treatment of it more accuracy & vitality.)

...Other reading (currently, a few minutes each): THE BOOK OF ENGLISH COLLECTS, Talmud, Luther, Wm.Barclay's FLESH AND SPIRIT, a poem in W.E.Garrison's SINGING SAGES: An Anthology of Poems as Aids to Reflection. The Net also gives me a poem a day [no charge]: dailypoem-subscribe@topica.com

4 Any other disciplined reading during/after the day's work? Technical periodicals (JOURNAL OF THE AM.ACADEMY OF RELIGION, JOURNAL OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE, FIRST THINGS, BOOKS & RELIGION, +), semi-technical periodicals (CHRISTIAN CENTURY, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, CHRISTIANITY AND THE ARTS, SPIRITUAL COUNTERFEITS PROJECT Newsletter & Journal, +), popular (NEWSWEEK, ATLANTIC MONTHLY, +). ("+" means explorations in libraries & on the Net.) Books? Study Bibles, commentaries, literary classics, encyclopedias (incl., on the Net, Encarta 2001 & the excellent World Book 2000), a few contemporary "magisterial" works, book reviews (many places on & off the Net), & must-reads (because "in" the public mind--e.g., the Harry Potters).

5 Nonreaders, poorreaders, goodreaders, greatreaders: I'll take good, I'm not great. I'll finish out this Thinksheet with a sketch of one characteristic of good & great readers, viz. critical attention to authors' relative **specifying/generalizing**. I remember/see big fat Abu whom I talked with long ago in Egypt: specific. I say "All Arabs [Abu being one] are...": that's general, generalizing being necessary (& dangerous!) for learning-communicating-managing-living. NOTE: To put Abu in the "Arab" category, I must abstract from him all specifics--his face, name, corpulence, every detail of primary reality, his Arabness having only a secondary reality. "From the same mouth comes blessing and cursing" (Jas.3.10 NRSV) depending on how authors/we treat the primary & secondary realities we deal with. Convictions are abstractions-generalizations, each one needing critical attention (all social prejudices being secondary-derivative realities, as are most fallacies).

Shortly before his death in 1950, Loree & I heard Count Alfred Korzybski (father of general semantics), lecture for 1½ hours on "is" (Clinton was right: It does indeed "all depend on your definition of 'is'."). In the early '20s, Santayana & Russell denied the identity of what's before & what's after "is"; & in 1931 A.K. termed this "the principle of non-identity." Language misleads by throwing particulars into categories, & the reader should be alert to correct for this danger.