"CHRIST WILL COME AGAIN" An argument that this be the theme of the 2001 Craigville Theological Colloquy

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS 3017
309 L.Ellz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone/Fax 508.775.8008 9.19.00
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1 For oldline Prot. churches, an ambiguous (if not embarrassing!) phrase in the classical liturgy, which our UCC churches increasingly have adopted. (For oldline Prot. churches, both classical-liturgical materials & the ecumenical lectionary are increasing the range of worshipers' exposure to the Goodly Heritage.)

2 The liberal churches "social gospel" have neglected all but the 1st of our Faiths' 3 strands of eschatology: (1) Thisworldly "justice & peace," depending on the OT & some "prophetic" sayings of Jesus; (2) The dominical note in the creeds ("He [Christ] will come again to judge the living & the dead"); (3) The endings of life, & beyond. These churches have especially neglected the 2nd strand, so I propose that CTC.18 aim to address this deficiency.

3 Becoming (re)acquainted with the great scriptures on this theme promises fresh hope, power, teaching, preaching, evangelism, mission.

4 In cultic & cultural competition, we need to face the Second Scandal, viz. our proclaiming in church & world that history has a Lord whose name is Jesus. (The First Scandal is that we are all hopeless, powerless deicides in need of a Savior, of the one we killed.) What now can it mean that we confess "Jesus Christ as Lord & Savior" not just for the living of these days but beyond these days?

5 The Parousia is the Bible's eschatological-apocalyptic cynosure, the focal-nodal center for all the Bible, OT & NT, has to say about the future as (1) theocentric & (2) moral (threats become punishments, promises become rewards). Biblically understood, the Second Coming is running not away from "justice & peace" issues, but toward.

6 We should not be put off from doing now the theology of the future by the likes of Tim LaHaye the rapturist: biblically done, this theology moves us not out of reality but toward a comprehensive vision ("Scripture and modern reflection agree: reality is whole only at its end."--Robt.Jenson, 244 in Alister E. McGrath's THE BLACKWELL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MODERN CHRISTIAN THOUGHT [Blackwell/93/96]).

7 The Enlightenment-liberal belief in automatic progress having collapsed, we Christians have the best opportunity in 3 centuries to present our personalistic vision of the future (e.g., "Jesus Christ, the hope of glory"--Col.1.27). Think here about how to address each of Wade Clark Roof's 5 subcultures (SPIRITUAL MARKETPLACE: Baby Boomers in the Remaking of Am. Religion [Princeton U.P./99]): dogmatists, born-again Christians, mainline believers, metaphysical believers & seekers, secularists.

8 "Christ will come again" is a processive event: Christ, in his resurrection, *has* come again! In a recent conversation I had with Paul Hammer on eschatology & ethics (including my referring to Amos Wilder's ESCHATOLOGY AND ETHICS IN THE TEACHING OF JESUS [Harper & Bros./39], which was a major factor in my PhD thesis under A.W.), he said "The power of the future is that [in the present] we do our ethics in the power of the resurrection."

9 For interpreting the Parousia for today, we need to attend to its hermeneutics (in the NT) & history (since). "Parousia" means presence/presencing: how do the NT's christianities (or, as M. Goguel put it, "types of Christianity") see our Lord's final self-presencing? Jewish christianity ended in Ebionitism; Paul's gospel became "deutero-Paulinism"; the moralistic christianity of James & the *Didache* was a clear category, as was the "pre-Catholicism" of First Clement & the distinctive theologies of the Fourth Gospel & the Letter to the Hebrews. While we canonical Christians build doctrine on canon (i.e., the Bible's 66 "books"), we must also consider the entire flow of early & later Christian literature. What does this intra-NT diversity on the Parousia have to say about our teaching-preaching of the Second Coming in church & world? about how we relate to those, in church & world, who construe the future differently from our way of construing it?

10 The principle of proportionality: what weight, in devotion/worship/teaching/preaching/counseling, should the Parousia have? It would be productive to ask this question in line of Yoshio Fukuyama's "Functional Analysis of Religious Beliefs," 446-451 RELIGIOUS EDUCATION Nov.-Dec./61.

11 A dismal but, in liberal circles, necessary discussion: Will the self-represencing of the Lord Jesus be (& was his Easter represencing) "fully human" but ungendered (with the prior question: is gender an essential of "true humanness"?)?

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12 Jesus Recome will be (as in the Lord's Prayer) "Kingdom Come." Two days ago in a group somebody said "Jesus was not a Christian." My reply: "Since Christians worship Jesus (in the Trinity), Jesus would be worshiping himself if he were a Christian--& self-worship is the reverse of biblical religion." The NT, & classical Christianity, insist that the Second Coming is more than a metaphor for Kingdom Come, though the point of both is in the Lord's Prayer's 2nd clause, viz., God's will "done on earth as it is in heaven."

In their GOOD NEWS IN EXILE (Eerdmans/99), M.B.Copenhaver, A.B.Robinson, & W.H.Willimon put this more-than-metaphor in terms of the person of Jesus Christ, who is himself the Christian hope: "The future has a name, a face: Jesus" (108); "Jesus Christ has given himself to and for the world, and he will not desist until he reigns" as King of the Kingdom (116)....Twenty years earlier, Geo.W.("Bill")Webber came out with a book using the same metaphor for the same subject, but with an urban emphasis: TODAY'S CHURCH: A Community of Exiles and Pilgrims (Abingdon/79). Its last sentence shows the Kingdom here/not-yet tension which is a major characteristic of the NT: "That Christ is Lord of East Harlem and his people are present makes it possible for those with eyes of faith to see signs of the kingdom and to know that God never leaves us without the hope which gives life its meaning & its joy."

13 One construal of the Parousia might be worded as "Christ will come again & again & again" (linguists call it iterative or punctiliar-linear). He came (the incarnation), he left (the crucifixion), he came again (the resurrection), he left (the ascension), he came again (in the Spirit at Pentecost)--& in that he now abides in faithful Christians, in his Church, & (visible in "signs of shalom") in the world. But the enveloping events--the incarnation & the "Second Coming" (the consummation)--are like poles holding up a line on which are all the lesser comings in & beyond the Bible. This is one of the essential contexts for illumining "Christ will come again."

14 Yes, "signs of shalom," a phrase frequent in Webber's book, in which the theme verse, "the verse we have been using throughout this book" (155), is Jer.29.7, which appears in the dedicatory: "To my colleagues at the N.Y.Theological Seminary,..., as together we seek to obey God's call to "Seek the **shalom** [traditional translation, "welfare"] of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its **shalom** you will find your **shalom**" (boldface & [] , mine). "Shalom" is from an extremely rich Hebrew root meaning safety, soundness (therefore, total personal health), security, peace, prosperity, friendship, good will (so, the word used as a greeting), reconciliation (by making amends), completion. The noun is Hebrew's best one-syllable summary of the soul's & society's vision of the good that's to be longed & striven for (& thus is shorthand for "thy Kingdom come" & "Christ will come again"). "Peace" (KJV) is an inadequate translation, but so is "welfare" (RSV, unfortunately continued in NRSV; bad USA connotations ["welfare dependency," "welfare as we have known it"]). TEV better: "the good of." Better still is CEV: "peace...prosperity." NIV is best: "**peace and prosperity.**".... STORY: Not long before the book's publication, in a weekly NYTS faculty Bible study we were working on this passage. Pres.Webber said "Can we find a better translation than 'welfare'?" I read the Hebrew aloud & said "Why translate 'shalom'?" He said "That's it!" & ever since has taught-preached-written "Seek the shalom of the city."

15 Human beings are as healthy-hearted as the futures they dream of are healthful. The colloquy might face personal/societal/cultural issues of **health/pathology** vis-a-vis hopes. The trajectory of the "theology of hope." Hopelessness as a factor in crime, suicide, community apathy.

16 Hope as a **back-formation** from faith that "Christ [*who has already won the future*] will come again. The italic clause is my pointing to the **proleptic** theme in Christian doctrine, as early as 1976 spelled out in some detail by Pannenburg (338f, Oct. JOURNAL OF RELIGION). Raymond E. Brown relates this to Jn.'s picturing "Jesus during the ministry speaking in the past tense of his death and resurrection" (on 132 of his Anchor Bible commentary: in Jn. on Jesus, "a strange timelessness or indifference to normal time sequence"). And in his (Fortress/00) GOD--THE WORLD'S FUTURE, Ted Peters says that in Jesus the end-future is "pre-actualized."