

HONEST TO SCRIPTURE AS A JUSTICE ISSUE (BOTH SENSES)

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When antebellum Southern preachers scrounged up Bible texts to support slavery, they were DIShonest to Scripture, whose trajectory is toward free obedience to the only Massa. Though a forest may have some bushes, its trees are what give it its identity as "forest": those few putatively pro-slavery texts were bushes in the great biblical forest. The contingency of ancient slavery cannot honestly be used to argue the cause of involuntary servitude: no human being has the right to force any other human being into slavery. But what about voluntary servitude: don't human beings have the right to sell themselves to other human beings? No. Why not? Because they don't have title, they don't own themselves, only God as Creator owns them, & God as Redeemer has clear title to them only if they personally so will. For a parallel, consider Chief Seattle's 1854 speech responding to pressure from Washington DC to sell land: You can't sell what you don't own. Since the land owns us, no way could we sell it. Today, with the exception of the few Muslim Arab slavers, nobody quotes sacred texts in favor of chattel slavery. Scripture is not to be used dishonestly, promiscuously, to argue the unjust cause of human ownership of human beings. That's a justice issue that's been won in the general court of human opinion....But this Thinksheet is concerned about another sense of being "honest to Scripture as a justice issue." The first sense involved being unjust to human beings. This sense reverses the terms. It's about being unjust to Scripture, treating Scripture cavalierly, promiscuously, as support for one's predetermined notion of justice to people. Of course the first sense was also, as indicated, dishonest to Scripture. Indeed it's downright difficult to be honest to Scripture when you're using it as warrant, as ethical sanction, as means to a scripturally debatable end (in the instance below), & impossible when the end is antiscritptural (as above). Now to my instance of the second sense: Below is a litany written by anti-apartheid leader Allan Boesak, president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (of which our United Church of Christ is a member). As are all uses of Scripture to support one's position, it's subject to such **criteria**, critical questions, as (1) does it use Scripture honestly [the primary question in this Thinksheet]? (2) Is it true in the sense of conformable to what is known in the public domain; is it factual? (3) Does it reflect & express the divine holiness (awesomeness, righteousness, love)? The litany's format is simple & powerful. The "Leader" expresses an implied attack on several groups of opponents. The "People" quote scriptures as responses to the Leader & thus implicitly as attacks on opponents whom the Leader wants the People, with him, to attack. This denial-litany is, somewhat disingenuously, titled "A Responsive Affirmation of Faith." My commentary will be in this typefont.

1. LEADER: It is not true that this world and its people are doomed to die and be lost. Who says it is true? Analysis reveals the half-truth: some think humanity is totally earthbound, having no destiny beyond this present life. But almost none in the S.African government, B.'s usual bete noire, are fair targets of this attack: if he means them, this attack is scurrilous--a bad start for a Christian litany. Certainly a bad start in the case of the certainly-wrong half of the statement: it is a generally recognized astronomical fact that "this world and its people are doomed to die." Our planet is not only biologically but also astrophysically fragile, its continued existence problematical. Sooner or later, some cosmic event is going to get us. God does not intend the permanence of this place in space: that puts theologically our best science as to earth's future....The Leader's opener is morally dubious & scientifically false & on both grounds theologically shabby....Given B.'s affirmative intent, which in general I support, how about trying your hand at the opening sentence?

PEOPLE: This is true: For God so loved the world that God gave God's only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him, shall not perish but have everlasting life.

Jn.3:16 speaks only of the world of people, not of "this world and its people." (This is a commonplace of Johannine theology.) Further, Jn. affirms (against B.) that people "are doomed to die and be lost" ("perish" is Jn.'s word), & that explains why "God gave God's...Son, that whosoever believes in him...not perish" in the experience of physical death. Since B.W.Bacon's great labors on Jn.-1-3Jn. at the beginning of the present century it's been clear to the world of biblical scholarship that "love" for this biblical author is an in-house word, shorthand for what causes coherence "in the Spirit" in the Christian community, especially in the community John has special responsibility for. It isn't that God is selective in his love toward humanity; it's that humanity is selective about its loves, & not everybody chooses to love God--so to those, God's love is ineffective (just as God, & you, can forgive nobody who doesn't want to be forgiven)....B. might be writing an evangelistic litany, which wouldn't make Jn.3:16 here an instance of a dishonest use of Scripture. But the rest of the litany shows it to be highly political, & that fact makes the use here of Jn.3:16 dubious if not outright dishonest. I believe in the biblical & Christian unity of "justification & justice," but that unity cannot be served by injustice to either term; & B. here is unjust to both....I object also to the barbarous "God...God...God's...." Besides being barbarous tautology, it distorts the text by overwhelming "Son" with "God" thrice. Can women be honored by dishonoring, distorting, Scripture?

2. LEADER: It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction.

Who is "we"? Everybody in S.Africa? Christians in S.Africa? Some Christians in S.Africa? B.'s congregation? Colored S.Africans (he's one)? Colored & Black S.Africans? All nonWhite S.Africans? Not knowing for whom he wrote this litany, we can't be sure from external evidence; but internal evidence is that Whites are excluded, since nobody's saying Whites "must accept...." Maybe the litany isn't racist, but it is racial-political. It's meant to rouse nonWhites to antigovernment action--a strange, but not illicit, use of this literary genre....The clump of three pairs of negatives unfairly implies that the government intends all these horrors--whereas what the government intends is "discrimination" in the franchise. Since in his own mind B. is as convinced that one-person-one-vote is inherent in "justice," he's as certain that inequality of franchise is as outside of God's will as all we Christians believe chattel slavery is. In my opinion, it's neither illogical nor fanatic to argue that freedom from being owned by another human being is the will of God; but it is illogical & fanatic to argue that a particular franchise-structure is the will of God (& accordingly all who suggest other franchise-structures are out of God's will)....Again, who is saying "we must

accept..."? B.'s opponents here are a tiny handful of fanatically racist Whites who are happy about all six of the horrors in B.'s catalog of woes. I must call racist, here, the implication that (1) White restrictions on nonWhites is the cause-without-remainder of the horrors & that (2) Whites in general, here, are the enemy. One day the bill will come due for anti-White racism in S.Africa, & Christian preachers will be among the payers--especially those, of whatever race, now preach Black power under the slogans of "one-person-one-vote" & "majority rule."....Chief Seattle (intro, above) objected to U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs' apartheid (reservations) but understood it was intended as an alternative to extinction. S.Africa's apartheid intended real, though limited, tribal self-government. Both tries have failed: who in either country doesn't admit it? After WWII, Amerinds became fully franchised: they're so few they can hardly dent the government. Full enfranchisement of S.African nonWhites would smash the government--which is OK if you think the government needs smashing, if you're for revolution instead of the present continuing evolution. But what of preaching that evolution is against the will of God, as B. & Tutu & some others facilely & fervently do? In judging that such preaching does & will do more harm than good, am I out of the will of God? B. has no doubt I am.

PEOPLE: This is true: I have come that they may have life, and that abundantly.

Who's "they"? The continuing words of the text, Jn.10:10, are these: "I am the good shepherd, who is willing to die for the sheep." And there is no "they": the text has only "you," meaning the Jesus-John community, not humanity in general, not "oppressed" humanity, not a particular nation or ethnic group(s) within a nation. Of course Jesus has good will for all people, wants "life to the full" for everybody who'll respond to him, wants everybody to respond to him. But B.'s politicizing of this intimate religious text so as to use the dominical sanction, Jesus' authority, against his (B.'s) opponents encourages, at one blow, both nonWhite racism & religious (God-&-Jesus-are-on-our-side) arrogance, calling upon two demons to do the Lord's work.

3. LEADER: It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction have come to stay forever.

True, but false--B. is guilty of false association, to smear--to imply anybody would think otherwise.

PEOPLE: This is true: For unto us a child is born...the prince of peace.

Who could take exception to using a Jesus-reference against "violence...hatred...war...destruction"? But note, again, the subtle use of Jesus-is-on-our-side-against-those-who-hate-us-&-treat-us-violently. In that highly religious country, political warriors on both sides have traditionally fired proof-texts at each other. (I once preached in a church that in 1864 lost all its hymnals: the congregation voted that they be used, in the war-caused paper shortage, as gunball wadding.) The establishment churches have officially ceased this abominable practice: I hope the nonestablishment churches soon do. But don't count on the likes of B. & Tutu to cut it out. It infests their rhetoric incantationally. And friends of mine who admit it will not say so publicly, fearing (they say) to give ammunition to the enemy. (What does that make me? Certainly I'm an enemy of neither side.)

4. LEADER: It is not true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil who seek to rule the world.

True, but what's the force of "simply"? Biblical religion teaches we are victims thereof, & disallows this victimization as excuse: because we are, in addition, self-victims, bad news to ourselves, we are excuseless (Po.1-3). But in B.'s litany, the blame is only on the other guy; there's no penitence about anything; its all "their" fault, "they" the powers being by implication in liberationist rhetoric the political & economic authorities. Reagan got away with this rhetoric (& seduced the self-righteous religious right into supporting him) by blaming America's troubles on "them," viz Washington DC, which had grown bureaucratically fat (then, after eight years, he left the federal government with 217,000 more employees that it had when he became president!). Contrast his opponent Carter, who asked the people to face humbly, penitently, the fact of our nation's "spiritual malaise." Or consider another duo: Nikolai Ceausescu's self-righteous arrogance on the left right up to his death, in contrast with Vaclav Havel's New Year's Day '90 speech as president of Czechoslovakia: We have become "morally ill because we have become accustomed to saying one thing & thinking another....We have brought [this] upon ourselves. If we can accept this, then we will understand that it is up to all of us to do something about it."

PEOPLE: This is true: "To me is given all authority..., and lo I am with you...."

5. LEADER: It is not true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted, who are the prophets of the Church, before we can do anything.

PEOPLE: This is true: I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

I've no objection to seeing a high crisis as an end-time & using in it scriptures of the End-time (Eschaton). But there's danger of turning the temperature up to high, exciting the people to overexpectation (my "OFD" disease, overexpectation-to-frustration-to-despair [#1696]). The people as it were disrobe, then freeze in the ensuring cold, the time when (as now in Eastern Europe) power has shifted from "the oppressors" onto the people's own shoulders. Dionysos, after the liberationistic revel, dumps you into the lap of Apollo. (While the Romans adopted the Greek God of wine under Dionysos' other name, Bacchos, "Liber" [liberation, the feeling wine gives!] was the name of their own God of wine.) Me, I've never been drunk on wine, but a few times I've been close to drunk on liberation; as hubris, both are sinful, dementing their devotees with unrealism.

6. LEADER: It is not true that our dreams for liberation of humankind, of justice, of human dignity, of peace, are not meant for this earth and this history.

PEOPLE: This is true: The hour comes, and it is now, that the true worshippers shall worship God in spirit and in truth. A blasphemous identification of "true worship" with a particular political project. Can we "do justice" to people while treating Scripture dishonestly, unjustly?