

## HOW IS CHRIST FORMED IN US TODAY?

This Thinksheets is notes & extensions from that sermon & from a television interview on the same subject last week. The sermon's text was Proverbs 1.20-33, an assigned ecumenical lection. Wedding the two sermons, what really matters is that Christ be so formed in us that we live, from habit, the cruciform resurrectional life in all our relationships, activities, goals, & prayers.

Also assigned was that in the sermon I should address two questions: (1) "How is this Bible passage good news?" & (2) "What does it have to say about Christian formation (in addition to Christian education, which is for information)?"

Before reading the text, I made two remarks about it for clarification:

(1) The term "simple," in the OT wisdom literature, isn't as pejorative as our "simple-minded." Rather, it designates people who drift along through life thoughtlessly & are thus easy targets for evil, not being committed to & trained in the good (as are [in the good sense] the pious), not being skeptics, & not being fools (atheists): the three non-pious categories are listed in v.22; the pious category is in the famous v.7: "The fear of the LORD [a synonym for the Hebrew religion] is the beginning [or essence or height] of wisdom."

(2) Wisdom, here & extensively in Hebrew-Jewish literature, is personified by the gender (feminine) of the Hebrew (then also Greek & Latin) noun (but unlike English, whose nouns do not have gender). Only a naive literalism would see any sexual significance in the "she/her/hers" of these wisdom-personification passages in the OT/Apocrypha/Pseudepigrapha, but much of feminism has made this oddly fundamentalistic error as though what's said about Ms.Wisdom reveals something of the so-called "feminine side of God." To disabuse ideologs of this conceit, two points:

(a) Certain "classes of ideas" are "regarded as feminine in Hebrew" & "are usually indicated by the feminine form." The first class is "abstracts" (abstract nouns such as "wisdom" & "folly")...."the feminine (sing. and pl.) of adjectives and participles is used substantivally in the sense of the Latin and Greek *neuter*"

(4[a] on p393 of GESENIUS' HEBREW GRAMMAR [Kautzsch/Cowley edd., Ox/52]). To show the nonmoral, nonsexual nature of these "feminine" Hebrew abstract nouns, this truly great grammar adduces Gn.50.20: You meant it for [fem.] evil, but God meant it for [fem.] good....In his COMPARATIVE GRAMMAR [actually, morphology] OF GREEK AND LATIN (U.of Chicago/33/42), Carl D. Buck states simply an important distinction applicable also to Hebrew (169): "Grammatical gender, except as it agrees with natural gender (male, female, sexless), is a purely formal distinction, observed in part in the forms of the nouns but more fully in the forms of the adjectives and pronouns."....Also bearing on feminist linguistic revisionism is the absence of grammatical gender in English: The OT only-masculine pronouns for God (a practice carrying over into Christianity) are, for the Hebrew-language mind, less apt to be misunderstood as natural gender than is true for the English-language mind. The solution must finally be not the elimination of the pronouns for God but education in their proper meaning & usage.

(b) Prejudicial proof-texting--collecting a catena of "Ms.Wisdom" passages in Hebrew & Greek-from-Hebrew literature--should be countered by the balancing "Ms.Folly" passages such as, in Proverbs, 9.13-18 ("a personification of folly"--S.H.Blank, "Folly" in IDB), 7 (Ms.Folly, paralleling [in 8 & 9] Ms.Wisdom), 14.1b. Further weakening feministic efforts to coop wisdom is the fact that what is apparently our earliest instance of the dramatizing of wisdom--viz., Job 28--has wisdom not as feminine but as neuter.

(Of course the sermon didn't include this--(2)(a)&(b)--technical linguistic stuff!)

Now to the **first** question: *How is Prov.1.20-33 good news?*

1 It's good news to know that in this world so full of follies (such as the "Survivor" series recently completed on television), somewhere there is wisdom.

2 It's good news to know that in the short or long run, wisdom is self-validating & self-vindicating--& this both positively (i.e., wisdom rewards) & negatively (i.e., folly punishes).

3 But *what* wisdom? The "worldly wise" have "smarts," but (1Cor.3.19 NIV) "the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight" when it seduces its victims into imagining that they aren't sinners in need of the Savior, are autonomous with no need

of a Lord, & can be fulfilled without communion with God.

Another way of distinguishing the wisdoms is outer/inner: "It is not wisdom to be only [outwardly] wise, / And on the inward vision close the eyes, / But it is wisdom to believe the heart..../....the soul's invincible surmise," as Santayana put it in his poem ("O World, Thou Chooseth Not") on Columbus (but he overrates "surmise" & underrates Columbus in saying that the surmise "was all his science and his only art").

The Bible's view of wisdom's essence can be put in five words: Knowing God is being wise. In the NT, "Christ Jesus has become for us wisdom from God--that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption" (1Cor.1.30-31 NIV). But (v.18) "the message of the cross is foolishness" to the worldly-wise.

4 It's good news that we have a God-centered Book which daily (if we so desire & do) invites us to God-centered living--a Book in which God is reading us as we are reading for God. (Thos.Merton's two clue for good Bible-reading: "What is this book I am reading? Who is this Who is reading me?")....A single verse in Jer. (18.18) states the three OT canonical sources of revelation: the prophet's "word," the priest's "law" (or instruction), & the sage's "wisdom" (NRSV, "counsel")--the three sections of the Hebrew Bible (Law, Prophets, Writings).

5 It's good news to know that the wisdom that saves human beings from aimlessness & soul-shipwreck is not the fruit of philosophy, which only the sharper brains are capable of, but is rather the fruit of faith, which is available as a gift to all who earnestly seek God, desiring to do his will and to enter into the joy of his salvation. Gal.4.19 uses, for this gift & its sequel, a mixed metaphor of the gestation & birth process: "I have birth pangs until Christ is formed in you."

Now to the **second** question: *What does this passage have to say about Christian formation?* Nothing directly, for it's pre-Christian; but indirectly it has much to say, & is in the direct line of what came to be revealed in the NT as "Christ, the wisdom of God" (1Cor.1.24)--in whom (says Col.2.3) are hid "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"--& about the same thing is said in the 1st chapters of Jn., Col., & Heb. So in this passage, what can we spy out about the inner & outer formation which in its fulness came to be Christian formation?

1 Formation is something deeper than INformation. In this "Information age," data-knowledge is compounding exponentially, but who would be so foolish as to claim the same for wisdom? Eccl. says there's "no end" to heaping up knowledge; but the "whole duty" of everyone is to love, seek, & obey God, "for God will bring every deed into judgment" (12.12-14).

2 Each of us begins as a small mass of stem cells each of which knows what to *form*. We know that in & beyond the womb things can go wrong, & we become DEformed; this is by genetic imperfections (nobody being biologically perfect) perhaps + congenital accidents, & may also be by our just going along to get along (i.e., by our being CONformed--but Ro.12.2 lays it out for us: "Do not be CONformed to this world, but be TRANSformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good, acceptable, and perfect." INformation may be imparted in the classroom (at least to those who are aware & alert), but *formation* occurs everywhere every moment of every day.

The issue is whether God is pleased with what we are permitting to form us, which we are responsible for: we cannot always control what gets our attention, but we are (as I bore my readers with saying) the lords & ladies of what **holds** our attention. And it is what holds our attention that forms our inner & consequentially our outer lives.

3 In Christian education, the difference between information & wisdom is the difference between belief that & faith in. Our public schools can deal "objectively" with the former but must stay away from the latter. In his THE REAL AMERICAN DREAM, Andrew Delbanco says that in the 17th & 18th cs., God was the center of American public education; in the 19th c., the nation; now, the individual self. Dear people, this will not do. This cannot last. What can last is Christ in us, the hope of glory here & hereafter. "All things bright & beautiful,.../All things *wise* & wonderful, / The LORD God made them all." That is the wisdom by which the truly wise let their souls & their lives be formed for the glory of God & the good of his creation.