

"THE CHRISTIAN **DISTINCTIVE** IS THE WORSHIP OF JESUS MESSIAH LORD SAVIOR."

--my diary of $\frac{1}{2}$ century ago today, reporting on a Reinhold Niebuhr lecture Loree & I heard that day in the U. of Chicago's Rockefeller Chapel

1 That was long before, in the interest of multiculturalism, all Christian symbols were removed from the chapel, which foul antihistorical deed was done long after preachers stopped committing there R.N.'s unicultural-particularist crime of calling Jesus *the* Messiah-Lord-Savior....Whether it's a crime or a command, or a command that itself is a crime, is the theme of this summer's Colloquy: "How shall we understand Jesus as Savior Now?"

2 Many NT passages teach what R.N. taught on that occasion--none more plain, in-your-face than the one I refer to in this Thinksheet's 1st line, whose previous clause is (also NRSV) "I am *the* way, and *the* truth, and *the* life." The Christian community this gospeler (gospel-writer, "evangelist"), John the Evangelist, served was multicultural, melding Jewish*obedience (walking, thus "the way"), Greek curiosity (thinking, thus "the truth"), & Oriental mysticism (spiritual being, thus "the life," with Jesus' "I am"s [a feature of the Gospel of John]).

YOUR CHOICE: Did Jesus himself actually make the exclusivist-particularist self-claims we read in the Fourth Gospel? Of course not, say the self-promotive members of the Jesus Seminar: the dogs ate his corpse (J.D.Crossan), & the Gospel of John as gnostic fiction has no historical value. (I've asked some of them whether Jesus said anything after his execution, & they say of course not.)

Clearly, R.N. (& the whole Great Tradition of the Faith) believed that Jesus kept talking after his death--Jesus Resurrectus, the resurrected Lord & Savior, the canonical Christ (Messiah). The Fourth Gospel is Jesus uniquely teaching a unique early Christian community, taking the servant-form appropriate to that community (in kenotic action: Phil.2.7). The Incarnation is God coming *only* & *appropriately* in Jesus. That's two particularities: particularly in Jesus, & particular to human needs. Because we classical-canonical Christians believe that the Holy Spirit presided over the formation of the Bible, Jesus' particular comings recorded in the Bible have a particular & continuing authority--so the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel is God come in Jesus **to** that community **for** all Christians of all times & places: chap.14, vs.6, is thus spoken to us all, no matter how embarrassing its narrowness (exclusivity) in our inclusivistic Zeitgeist. If we are faithful-canonical Christians, we ask not whether the verse is true but how, here & now, it is true (as in the Colloquy's theme-statement, §1 [above]).

Our verse, Jn.14.6, is the 1st one mentioned in the anti-Hitler Barmen Declaration (1934) after these words: "In view of the destructive errors of the German [i.e. pro-Nazi] Christians and the present national government, we pledge ourselves to the following evangelical truths: ¶1. 'I am the way and the truth and the life: no man cometh to the Father, but by me.' (John 14:6)." Call this exclusionism, not exclusivism: the intention is to exclude false ideas, not people....Then, after quoting John 10:1,9, this: "Jesus Christ, as he is testified to us in the Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God, whom we are to hear, whom we are to trust and obey in life and in death."....The remainder of the Declaration is a series of "We repudiate"s--7 of them! Here are the scriptures adduced: 1Cor.1.30; Eph.4.15-16; Mt.20.25-26; 1P.2.17; Mt.28.20; 2T.2.9.

3 Against the **pull to apostasy**, Barmen heard a divine call to narrow confession (so, these Lutheran, Reformed, & United church leaders in Germany [including chief-drafter Karl Barth] called themselves the Confessing Church) "in a time of common need and trial [*Anfechtung*: attack, opposition, temptation]): I believe that we Christians now, especially in the West, face no less a Faith-threatening *Anfechtung* though its lineaments be different: "God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! How shall we confront ourselves?....Who will wipe off this blood from us? With what water could we cleanse ourselves?"--Nietzsche, despairing that (1) Western metaphysics' logical conclusion, nihilism, has (he d. in 1900!) come upon us, so (2) Western values will inevitably lose their attraction for & power over humanity. Salvific metaphor of purification: blood! cleanse ourselves!

*The baseline: I take the 2nd & 3rd nouns as (Hebrew-"construct") adjectives: "I am the true & living Way." (Cp. "halacha" as walking.)

4 "We must counter false salvations with the true salvation, and show people that true liberation is found only in the Gospel" (Chas.Colson, AFA JOURNAL 7.99 24). True: it's done for you by "grace"; false, do it yourself. As the cartoon shows, "grace" in our society has many connotations! Here it's politicized, & its often sentimentalized as "amazing grace."....The Gk. word, so frequent in the NT, is *χάρις* *charis* & transcends

WIZARD OF ID

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the active/passive (save yourself / be saved) divide: it's used for both the beginning ("gift"--eg, Philemon 3) & the end ("thanks"--eg, Philemon 4) of a process. One may hear the offer of salvation "in Christ" & refuse the gift: the refusal is a "work" outside of salvation--but accepting the gift with gratitude (an Eng. wd. with the same root as "grace") is a "work" within salvation, the 1st work in "working out" one's salvation (Phil.2.12-13: "for it is God who works in you"). Theology is *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding). God offers--gives both the faith & the will to seek under-standing, the humble standing under to receive the continued giving of the Creator-Redeemer-Sanctifier. In being saved, I am in the **middle** between the Savior & the saved-saving Community; both are "in" me, & I & the Community are "in Christ." From different perspectives, my salvation is entirely the work of my-our Savior & is entirely up to me as a person (not as an individual, entirely on my own)....Our under-standing of all this, basic to "How shall we understand Jesus as Savior Now?", is being enriched by developments in philosophical hermeneutics (Gadamer, Habermas, Ricoeur, et al). In a brilliant essay, Phillipe Eberhard relates this to linguistic hermeneutics, in particular the middle voice transcending active & passive: "The Mediality of Our Condition: A Christian Interpretation" (6.99 JAAR 411-34), with a splendid exposition of Phil.2.

5 We are born into mother-speech, & born again into Christ-speech, the Christian language, salvation-language, which we are to respect & feed on--as the earliest Christians remembered Aramaic expressions from Jesus & the earliest Buddhists remembered Pali expressions from Gautama (eg, "nibbana," later [Sanskrit] "nirvana")....The fundamental Christian language is that of the Greek Bible (OT & NT), which is (in contrast to Eng.) rich in the middle voice....Let me try a parable to convey the force, range, & richness of the middle voice. A bride's surprise gift to the groom was a house. "But it's really *your* house," he insisted. "No," said she, it's yours!" "Well then," he persisted, "it's ours!" She smiled: "If you say so, but you're responsible for it." He laughed: "In that case, it's mine!" The event--the gift & the banter about it--occurred because of, & within the sphere & practice of, conjugal **love**.

Christian salvation is an eternal love-affair with the Savior, & love is fed by acts of devotion (doing for the Savior, doing as the Savior does & bids us do). Christian hymnody is full of it: "The love of Jesus, what it is / none but his loved ones know"... "Fairest Lord Jesus..., Thee will I cherish"... "Jesus, the very thought of thee / with sweetness fills me breast".... Like conjugal love, Christian salvation is less a possession & more a relationship. Neglecting piety (at heart, the cultivation of the relationship) & the possession (& gratitude for it) diminishes: "How tedious and tasteless the hours / when Jesus no longer I see"....

6 All the titles in Rein.Niebuhr's series (this Thinksheet, line 3) are **salvific**: Jesus means Savior (Mt.1.21); Messiah means anointed to save by defeating enemies & ruling with justice/mercy; Lord means saving from internal strife (the Balkans!) & external threats, effectuating peace by power & (possibly) love; & Savior is the categorical title for the nothing-but-good-news leader, loved by a grateful people. In its lavish use of these & additional titles, the NT instructs us to find, in whatever our culture or time or circumstance, "Jesus as Savior now." For we Christians believe that in him is fullness of life, & light inextinguishable (Jn.1.5).