

## "THE CHURCH'S MISSION IS....

not to be the conscience of the world, nor to serve as a catalyst of change--as if there could be liberation without death--but rather to bear witness to the source of its life, 'to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ' that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might be known (Eph.3.9ff), 'from whom every family in heaven and earth is named' (v.15)." (Underlinings, mine.)

--Brevard S. Childs, BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible, Fortress/93, p.446

1 "Childs" is already a classic in the succeeding waves of biblical theology. It's (1) state-of-the-art scholarly, (2) fair to alternative points of view & to opponents, & (3) clear in stating his own views as to what they are not as well as as to what they are (as in the sentence of which this Thinksheet is an exposition).

2 His 1st "not": The Vatican (e.g., at the Cairo population conference) acts as though its (the church's) mission were (at least in part) to be the conscience of the world. (Childs doesn't refer here, or elsewhere, to particular churches.) In the U.S., some Protestant evangelicals have joined with Roman Catholics in a sociopolitical alliance--e.g., against abortion. And the early American Puritan aim included being the general human community's conscience (e.g., Elder Brewster's "city set on a hill"). Further, the National Council of Churches' part in the drafting & promotion of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is as clear a case of the church wanting to help shape the conscience of the world as anything Rome has done since WWII to be the conscience of the world.

Nowhere does Childs pass judgment on the particular actions in the above ¶. What he does do is to rule them all out as worthy of being under the umbrella of "the mission of the church."

3 His 2nd "not": Certainly Childs does not condemn churches for occasionally weighing in on the side of social justice--as, e.g., the UCC's Robt. Spike was an influential lobbyist with L.B.J. toward the passage of the 1964 civil rights legislation. But in saying the church's mission is something else, he claims that being catalytic to social change is no more than peripheral to the church's mission.

That's a hard saying for America's Protestant mainline, these liberal churches having come close to identifying the church's mission with its "justice & peace" moral influence in church & world. Uncritically jumping on the liberation band-wagons bypasses the gospel wisdom that "without death" there can be no significant liberation (in the traditional liturgical phrase, "from sin, death, & the devil").

4 To say what the church's mission *is*, Childs reveals his canonicalism, his belief that the *whole* canon (all the books in the Christian Bible) should function, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, *as a whole* (integratedly, emically), the process he calls **canonical-critical** in contrast both to **uncritical** (fundamentalist, literalist) & to **historical-critical** (liberal, etic [the Bible providing patterns to be deconstructed into raw data reconstructible into new patterns, e.g. "the historical Jesus" (my example)]). . . . Technical note: For the above usage, scholars take the end of "phonemic" (meaning actual sets of sounds-in-relation) to make *emic*, & the end of "phonetic" (the study of sounds in separation from one another) to make *etic*.

5 *How* does Childs reveal his canonicalism in his characterization of the church's mission? By using Ephesians as authority for the conviction that the church's central task is (Childs' words) "to bear witness to the source of its life," viz. Jesus Christ (not "the historical Jesus" or gnostic "Christ," but the One who Came, in the Spirit is Here, & Is Coming--God's self-incarnation, the Second Person of the Trinity). The etic-analytic, historical-critical thinker tends to give Ephesians (as probably deuteropauline, summarizing Paul to focus & preserve his message) a lower authority than "Paul" (the nine letters all scholars agree are Paul's). Rightly, Childs refuses this judgment. He considers, as I do, that Ephesians is an authentic-accurate transcription & extension of the Apostle's preaching. Paul scattered his words to the churches: Ephesians gathers them as a "wisdom" (3.10) for the powers (earthly & supramundane) & the ages--with strong use of nouns.

6 This brings me to an obvious but crucial observation: hermeneutic (how the Bible is viewed) & practic (what the church sees, & acts on, as its mission) are coeval, born & existing together. In seeing Jesus as "a peasant sage," the Jesus Seminar leaders (esp. J.D.Crossan) see the church's mission as disseminating this wisdom in & beyond the church, with the presupposition that this particular wisdom is from God, i.e. a matter of revelation. That is an instance of historical-critical thinking. Now note, in the quote this Thinksheet is studying, how differently Childs' canonical-critical thinking uses "wisdom"! The former's context is *Sitz im Leben* (Jesus', & our, actual life-situations, with similarities & differences): the latter's context is ecclesiastic ("through the church," v.10) & cosmic ("the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places," same v.).

Does Childs' here differ from uncritical thinking? Not in substance, but in method (he always takes historical-critical thinking into account) & in tone (he's irenic, always concerned for the unity love desires, within the integrity truth demands). The canonical-critical position sometimes leans left toward radical criticism, sometimes right toward classical orthodoxy. Reminds me of something Norman Gottwald said of my Thinksheets: "Your uncommon blend of conservative, liberal and radical views constantly upsets the expectations of readers." At various life-stages, I learned to think in all three modes, which do indeed "blend" in my writings.

7 Now for a CASE STUDY: Eliz. Schlüssler-Fiorenza, I recall, wrote her doctoral dissertation under E. Käsemann, whom Childs treats of in 16 places. S.-F. used K.'s historical-critical thinking as the baseline for her feminist hermeneutic- & -theology....Childs' 212-217 is both appreciative & critical of Käsemann:

K. attacked J.Jeremias' confidence that with proper tools, scholars could reach the earthly Jesus' "exact words" (*ipsissima verba*), (I add) the positivistic-historical assumption now being continued by the Jesus Seminar. Form criticism opposes that history-of-religions' approach. C.213: "The content of the New Testament in its function as witness is kerygmatic in nature and its proclamation [I add the Greek, "kerygma"] cannot be simply identified with a modern critical reconstruction of a historical portrait."....K.'s teacher Bultmann "argued for the sharpest discontinuity between the historical Jesus and the Christ of the church's faith." Next p.: "Over against such radical discontinuity Käsemann argues for the theological significance of the earthly Jesus," though K. "fully agrees with" B. "that there is no penetration behind the kerygma to a historically recoverable Jesus apart from faith"; but without "the historical particularity of the earthly Jesus," Christianity drifts off into "docetism or mythology." But to make the earthly Jesus "serve as a criterion of the kerygma, that is, for the authentic Christian gospel," K. "called for a rigorous historical critical analysis of the kerygma in order to 'discern between the spirits' and to establish the authentic kerygma apart from its many distortions and harmonizations. "Claiming a warrant from the Reformation (i.e. Luther)," K. "proposed...a canon within the canon." His historical Jesus is "largely informed by his interpretation of Paul," (p.215) "the justification of the godless" being "the heart of the gospel." But his "manner of setting up the problem is clearly a legacy of the Enlightenment, and not that of the Reformation." But Barth, instead of trying to separate in the NT the true from the false witness to the gospel, insisted that "in spite of its [the NT's] total time-conditionality the true witness of the gospel can be heard in the text through the continuing work of the Spirit. The NT is not a dead document needing to be purified, but a living voice waiting to be heard." K. is Enlightenment also in that he "replaces the Christian canon with his own private evaluation of what is its authentic witness....he fails to reckon with the canon's theological role of charting the arena within which the church encounters the kerygma" & perceives "heresy. Indeed the task of understanding the gospel through a plurality of witnesses called forth genuine theological reflection," testing "scripture on the basis of the gospel" & "interpret[ing] the gospel on the basis of...canonical scripture." 216: But K. was in error in identifying the earthly Jesus (which the NT contrasts with his continuation as the resurrected Lord) with the Enlightenment (*Religionsgeschichte*) "historical Jesus," wrongly "evaluating the truth of the Gospels from the perspective of historical probability, logical consistency, and cultural relativity." All feminist hermeneutics/theology depends of K.'s type of looseness. See Childs' 24 on feminist captivity to Schleiermacher & Freud.