

"...AND GRACE WILL LEAD ME HOME"

Titus 2:11-15

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636

Phone 508.775.8008

Noncommercial reproduction permitted

Dear _____,

Today I read you these words from the Bible, beginning with "For the **grace** of God has appeared...." You were enraged & shouted, "Rip out that page & wipe your ass with it! It's false! Nobody's going to wipe your ass for you! Human life is do-it-yourself all the way!" You were so full of denunciation that doubtless you could not hear my annunciations--so here they are, in hope you'll attend thereto in a cooler moment.

1 "Grace" is Christianity in one word, a monosyllable signaling the Christian Story as no other word can (certainly not "love"). Since you virulently hate the Christian religion, "grace" more than any other word is the hot button releasing your rage, while for me it's the hot button freeing my heart to praise & joy.

2 The paradox of grace is that it's an *active* dependency, 180° away from a *passive* dependency such as welfarism. Nobody in his century was more active than Jn. Wesley, who enjoined his followers to "pray knowing that all depends on God, preach & live knowing that all depends on you." The irony of your illogic is your supposition that if you submitted to grace (as you once came close to doing), you would do nothing, just trust God to do everything.

3 Please give yourself another chance to think about grace: read Titus 2:11-14 (almost certainly not directly from Paul, for whom you have a special hate). Note especially that the passage ends not with let George (God) do it but with "zealous for good deeds" (New Revised Standard Version). You preach wisdom, compassion, unselfishness: why are you blind to the fact that grace can be an ally of yours? why must you view it as enemy? As I put it in my commentary on THE PASTORAL LETTERS (UCP/64, p.107), "The free and saving (or healing) love of God is the motivation and power for discipline and obedience, negative and positive." In vs.14, Jesus' intention in his unselfishness toward us was that we become unselfish toward others, involve ourselves in benevolent-humanitarian efforts ("good deeds"). For this letter to you I've underlined "motivation": where are you going to get the motivation to help people off their narcissistic duffs & into their altruistic duties? You seem to me to have more passion to get rid of religion than you have phil-anthropy (Gk., "love for humanity"). And passion to get rid of something--negative passion--is powerless to move anybody to positive action. Self-discipline here is no craven knuckling under but the free choice of shaping oneself up to be useful to the neighbor near & far--in a word, your word "compassion." And I do mean free: "perfect liberty is perfect obedience to the perfect law" (Fosdick).

4 Again, you & grace should get along just fine together, as you're both levelers. You level by preaching the universal human potential for unselfishness: "God means unselfishness," you say, reducing religion to ethics (or, as you would put it, replacing religion with transreligious ethics): grace levels by (1) seeing human beings classlessly as sinners & offering "all" (vs.11) us sinners "salvation," & (3) "training" how to live & (4) what to "hope" for (vv.12-13). With God there are no privileged individuals or institutions; (5) all qualify, by repentance & faith, to participate in the redemption wrought by Jesus Christ's self-sacrifice "for us," who thereby become "a people of his own" (vs.14).

You do not grasp how radically leveling early Christianity was, a radicality graspable only when texts are interpreted in social context. As my commentary puts it (again, *in loco*), "Christianity was revolutionary from center to circumference, from devotion to social action....developing gradually through the centuries. [Eg.] The author tells slaves that the quality of their conduct is to be derived from the fact that they are Christian, not by their status as slaves."

Let's stay with the slavery issue to show the distinction between a pastoral-provisional instruction & a principle. Canonical exegesis looks at each Scripture passage in light of the whole Scripture. Galatians 2:26-28 is **principle**: "in Christ Jesus....there is no longer Jew or Greek,...slave or free,...male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus": in the church ("in Christ Jesus"), the master/

slave distinction does not exist. But our Titus author confronts the existential fact that slavery exists in the general society, where Christian slaves should center their attention on their Christian witness (vv.9-10): "pastoral" advice (& Titus is one of "The Pastorals Letters" in the NT) always must have one eye on principle & the other on the practical, on **practice**. Again, my commentary: "Since the passage concerning slavery bespeaks a social conservatism undermined by biblical doctrine at other places in the Scriptures, how do we arrive at an understanding about pace in presentday social action? Should we be in a hurry to effect social changes? Does this passage remind us of some of our uses of religion to bolster undesirable aspects of the status quo? Is a major function of religion that of 'sanctioning injustice,' as James Baldwin has suggested?" As you can see, mine is a pastoral commentary.....I've gone into this much detail here to adjust for the facts that you've had (1) no training in interpreting texts in light of their living contexts (& so often yield to the temptation to twist a text to mean what you want it to, & cover by calling it "the deeper meaning") & (2) no experience in official pastoral case (ie, with institutional responsibility)--so your haughty highmindedness is adolescent though your body is way beyond adolescence. A little meditation on these two facts should make it possible to practice more of the wisdom & compassion you preach.

5 To sustain your campaign against grace, you've developed a soft-shoe slippery interpretive choreography. Knowing the world's scriptures, you make "**God**" mean, in any biblical passage, whatever you want it to. In Acts 17:24, in order to maintain your consistent (!) disagreement with Paul, you make "God" mean "the Energy Source of the Universe," though Paul is crystal clear as to what "God" he means. Fact: Paul's God "does not live in shrines made by human hands." To say Paul was wrong, you define "God" in a way that permits residence in such shrines! To achieve your New Age results, you regularly treat biblical passages dishonestly. A parallel ploy is your persistent claim to occupy a higher ground than "religion" (your claim to be "transreligious")--though as I said to you on the phone today, "I know no one more passionately religious." For you, "Unselfishness" has the same spiritual-devotional dynamic as the Trinity has for me. If I'm religious (& I am), you are.

6 How easy it is for child to see parent as sinner! Original **sin** & personal-individual **sin** have had a longer go at the parent. If you become a spiritual parent (ie, win disciples), your movement will soon show signs of perversity, including self-serving bureaucracy: your impulse in history will confirm a doctrine you don't believe in, viz original sin. Some of the adolescent arrogance of the Boomers is, thank you, wearing off. What a blessing if the children could repent, in their childhood, of sins they're not yet old enough to commit! You like to call "Dear child" anybody who disagrees with you: please use the sanction of maturity on yourself.

7 You scoff at "**grace**" = the Christian Story that God came as Jesus, died to save us, rose, & will rule "all things." All who are outside the Story scoff, for it's believable only "by the grace of God" through the internal working of the Holy Spirit. All this is in my language-world, & none of it is in yours. But a difference: I do not scoff at your language-world. I'm too compassionate for that. I suggest that you worship your god "Compassion" by ceasing to scoff at my language-world. You preach that human beings should respect one another's ways of seeing, & living in, the world; but you yourself do not practice what you preach... You like to quote Nietzsche: "It is out of the deepest depth that the highest will rise." The Gospel is that in Jesus, that has occurred, & through him will occur for us. Resurrection. God's kenosis (self-emptying) in Jesus, our kenosis in discipleship to Jesus (Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23).

8 Because "**grace**" is the most comprehensive word for describing the Faith, Christian hymnody abounds with it. I'll finish this page with a few instances: (1) "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!" (In the Presbyterian Hymnal 1990, it's also in five Amerind languages.) (2) "Come, Thou fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing Thy grace....O to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be!"