

Gn.24.40: "the Lord, **before*** whom I walk...." (KJV, NRSV)

"I tell you this now **before** it occurs...."--Jn.13.19, 14.29

Phil.3.13 KJV: "reaching forth unto those things which are **before**" (NRSV: straining for what lies ahead....")

AGENDA 2000: WHAT NOW FOR THEN? the church today for tomorrow --
personal notes toward a national planning meeting of the UCC's "Confessing Christ"

1 In the current debate about the future of the mainline (old Protestant) churches in America, if any, I ask this: Would God miss us? To the extent that our singing is truly to worship him in "his presence" (Ps.100.2), he'd miss the music if we were to die off. The church is worthy of the world's awareness only to the extent that the church lives *coram dei*, "before" (ie in conscious awareness of, & in the presence of) God. "Walking" is the central Heb. metaphor for this. In the Mic. passage, we "come before the Lord" to make an offering of our walk, our being-in-action--an offering acceptable to the extent it's "humble," ie submissive-obedient as a servant before a lord, the Lord. (The Gn. passage states this truth simply: "walking" is life-in-action, behavior, religion-&-ethics; & it's biblical only when it occurs in the presence of "the Lord.") The "good" offering meets the "require[ments]" of one's being devoutly-subordinately-meekly present to God while walking in the way of his ethical holiness, his character as righteous (so, "do justly") & merciful (so, "love kindness"). Being just is not acceptable behavior vis-a-vis God. Being kind is not acceptable behavior vis-a-vis God. But being before God, living in his presence, leads to one's active participation in God's character: **worship is foundational** to biblical religion, whose primary product is pious souls, devout spirits. So the primary programming of biblical religion is to produce this product, & organizations whose primary programming has some other goal are not instances of biblical religion. (The signature scripture of "Confessing Christ" says all this in Christian language: "...that foundation is Jesus Christ" [1Cor.3.11].)

At supper this evening in our home, I asked an Episcopalian why she left one of our churches to flee to Canterbury. "I hungered for devout worship; what I was getting from my pastor was the poems of Edgar Guest." "To the pure & healthy internal eye," said Augustine, "He is everywhere": how work with the Spirit to produce in congregants that eye? Preaching "justice & peace" & all that good liberationistic stuff won't do it. Preaching "love" (sentimentality, "Edgar Guest") won't do it. Preaching reason won't do it: "Reason, no matter how aided by the senses, has short wings" (Dante, PARADISO, Canto 2). Our post-Christian (post-Constantinian) time calls for pietism in a new mode.

2 The mainline churches' establishment assumption--that American society is Christian enough to justify applying to the general community what Scripture aims at the special community, "the people of God"--must be abandoned. Bill Webber was unhappy with his publisher's naming his sketch of the East Harlem Protestant Parish GOD'S COLONY IN MAN'S WORLD, but now we have mainline-church critics (Hauerwas et al) using "colony" with the double meaning of its Roman origin: (1) a settlement of Romans (2) in a non-Roman area in which the settlement is an alternative community. Increasingly, the actual situation of the mainline churches (though they've yet to adjust their mission to it) is that of the evangelical churches (whose action conforms to it): our situation is protevangelical: our **evangelism** must presume that the "unchurched" (& as Kierkegaard insisted, many of the churched) are "unsaved" (ie, unconverted, undisciplined, to the Lord Jesus Christ). A major ego-impediment here is the fear-&-shame of behaving like "those evangelicals."....The same shift needs to be made also in "the mission fields," in which now the mainline churches--in contrast to the evangelical churches--do not evangelize, ie preach for converts.

3 As mainline pastoring becomes more & more women's work (seminary men being a shrinking minority), the mainline churches are in increasing danger of becoming female institutions, with a feminine élan & a feminized deity. "Confessing Christ" should welcome women into the clergy guild but fight the current God-revisionism, of which the most serious symptom is the ban on the biblical practice of using only masculine (never feminine or neuter) pronouns for God. Because the anti-"he" tabu has gotten so strong a grip on our liberal seminaries, & thence upon many "Confessing Christ" leaders, I have little hope for our "Confessing Christ" movement.

Is "feminized deity" too strong? Then say "demasculinized deity"--but what "image"--recognizable personal characteristics would "it" have? Unsurprisingly (because we're made in "his" image), the biblical God has all the best marks of both sexes. Also unsurprisingly (since androgens are more aggressive than estrogens, by God's will), the Bible's God has masculine-active characteristics. Patriarchally, he creates us, lays down the laws (in Mic.6, "require[ments]"), expects obedience, disciplines-punishes the disobedient, suffers with his household to reestablish its order. Today our outgoing (both senses) pastor preached a patriarchal sermon (do's & don't's) to prepare us to receive the new pastor (as it happens, a woman); & in calling it patriarchal, I was speaking accurately. If when she leaves our new pastor preaches such a lay-down-the-law sermon, will it be matriarchal? Only if she's transformed our congregation into a matriarchy! No, it will be patriarchal, a gender (not sexual) characteristic of our religion. All this is sensed in Christian communions (Catholic, Orthodox, & most Protestant evangelical) that refuse (wrongly, I believe, but understandably) to ordain women....The mainline churches' present slide-away from the masculine & toward the feminine, intellectually undergirded by feminine exegesis & feminist theologies, is a heresy in process of formation as a new religion. A heroic project for "Confessing Christ" would be to say NO! We are doing so in attacking a product of the heresy, the NEW CENTURY HYMNAL, which has thoroughly demasculinized the deity by *never* referring to God the pronominal way the Bible *always* does.

4 Greatgrandfather Brenner, a cabinetmaker in Germany, bought a black walnut forest (the best cabinet wood) in western NY, &, a quarter century later, had evolved into a fruitfarmer, by having planted a fast-growing fruit tree every time he felled a slow-growing walnut. So the early church evolved from a decision (conversional) religion into a birth religion, infant baptism largely replacing adult baptism. I remember the shock when Barth went antipedobaptist: Christendom (Constantinianism) is dead, & continuing to baptize babies (1) unwittingly conceals that fact & (2) blurs the line we need to draw between church & world. In cultures in which the father decides the family religion, his conversion automatically converts the other family members, including (if any) slaves (eg, Ac.16): that is a decision religion, but it evolves into a birth religion & thus into a **culture religion**....In terms of the upcoming Craigville colloquy on how to be prophetic (ie, world-engaging) while remaining catholic (ie, affirming Christian unity), Barth's position sacrifices the latter to the former....."Confessing Christ," which seeks to draw the line between canonical-faithful witness & any-theology-goes liberalism, should agree with Barth. But it's hard: The mind more follows life than leads it, & a rich baptismal theology has evolved around pedobaptism & constitutes a barrier against Christian renewal....A baptized infant is a culture-religion Trojan horse leading to the baptism of the surrounding culture when the gates are open: baptized egalitarianism, baptized feminism (including its exegetical-theological mind, which already has formed into a barrier against change), etc. But to be constant in its commitment to be in-house UCC, "Confessing Christ" can go for only cosmetic changes, certainly not saying NO to infant baptism.

5 Look, please, at the other two scriptures atop this Thinksheet's title. Our faith is to be future-oriented both in foresight (the Jn. reff.) & in efforts (Phil.). "New occasions teach new duties," & he whose name is "Faithful and True" (Rev.11.1; cp.21.5, 22.6), the Lord of the future, is calling us to re-imagine, rethink "ancient goods" that have become "uncouth," dysfunctional.

It is now dysfunctional, & evil, to continue to think-act **myopically** on:

(1) Humanity, which has a God-given unique task, but not a sacred status, within biosphereic life. Mind is explorative-conservative: when exploration is successful, mind shifts to the conservation task, constructing barriers against change. The Christian anthropology (doctrine of "man" under "God" within "nature") is now a barrier against revisioning **humanity-in-nature**. But a "theology of ecology," of "the integrity of creation," is now emerging. Humanity is overburdening the biosphere, & its tonnage must be reduced. In this perspective, the conception-to-death "ethic of life" must be seen as a well-intentioned, evil-producing myopia.

(2) The individual, who must now be seen, correctively, as a **person-in-community** (within **humanity-in-nature**). Jesus' sociopolitical focus on the individual was not devotional: he was not worshiping the individual! This shift has revolutionary implications for health care, education, ethics, politics, criminology, & religion.