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ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS
309 L.Ellz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone/Fax 508.775.8008
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OBEDIENCE IS **AUTHORITY**-CONFIRMATION IN ACTION

A meditation looking toward a four-day Confessing Christ national steering committee study-retreat on **"On What Authority?"**--with special though not exclusive attention to the authority of Scripture

1 The Bible is a book centering in **direct personal authority** to create (Gn.13: "God said...and there was light."), to destroy, to empower, to enfeeble, to delegate authority, to define right/rights, to provide-protect-save.

When a Roman officer trusts Jesus' authority-power to heal, he says (Mt.8.9, L.7.8) he himself has authority-power to give commands to soldiers & slaves under him. Jesus praises him for having "faith" in Jesus' parallel power to get things done, a power his disciples came to believe to be divine--finally, not merely power *from* God but God himself powerfully in action (the christological ultimate). To this central biblical power-idea, the correlative virtue-response is obedience (not only as "the organ of spiritual knowledge" [as a classic 19th-c. sermon put it], but as the *esse* [the very being] & *sine qua non* [absolute essential] of Jewish religion & Christian discipleship).

2 Why bother to remark this command/obedience character of Scripture? (1) Because those of us who live in Bible as fish swim in water aren't aware of this characteristic of our holy book unless it's called to our attention, as I must do in light of the upcoming study-retreat; & (2) Because the Zeitgeist, the spirit of our time & place (the U.S.), is radically at variance from this characteristic. In particular, gender feminism despises the whole concept of obedience, & rightly senses that the biblical deity is masculine (no matter what strategems--such as suppressing the Bible's pronouns for God--may be undertaken to conceal his masculinity [please, not maleness!).

To experience the prominence, indeed centrality, of the Bible's command/obedience theme, read in any Bible dictionary/encyclopedia the articles on "authority," "power," etc. Then set alongside the Bible some other of the world's sacred scriptures--e.g. Buddhist & Taoist--in which authority is **indirect** (viz. via wisdom) & **impersonal** (no gods or goddesses, though both developed in pop or folk forms of these religions).

3 "Be thou, O God, exalted high, / And, as thy glory fills the sky, / So let it be on earth displayed, / Till thou art here, as there, obeyed [underlining mine]." (As the Lord's Prayer puts it, "on earth as it is in heaven." There had been, in heaven, rebellion against the heaven-Father, but it was put down--as now the earth-rebellion is being put down by the One to whom [Mt.28.18] "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given"). In Boston recently I read that doxology in a Unitarian (not fundamentalist!) prayerbook, & the pastor graciously gave me a copy.

4 Worship, **praise**, is the only form of obedience with no power-motive other than the confirmation of God's authority in creation, providence, redemption, & consummation. Paradoxically, praise of the Other both insults human autonomy (which is self-incurved, on "self-esteem") & perfects human liberty (Fosdick's "Perfect freedom is perfect obedience to the perfect law"). The biblical deity "is jealous of" (i.e. reserves to himself) praise, vengeance, & dominion-domination-dominance (Latin for "lordship," whose complementation, on the model of the Lord Jesus, is servanthood). The biblical paradigm (revealed analogy, not optional metaphor) is deity/devotee, patron/client, lord/servant, command/obedience ("You are my friends if you do what I *command* you" [Jn.15.14]; "I do as the Father has *commanded* me, so that the world may know that I love the Father" [Jn.14.31]). The faithful Christian lives this vertical (God-above) mentality, "accept[ing] the cost and joy of discipleship" (as the UCC Statement of Faith puts it): to resent this as "hierarchical" is to reject biblical religion, deconstructing the Bible's God to construct a "nonauthoritarian" deity "conformed to this world" [NRSV fn. of Ro.12.2, "age"]).

In "the world," we understand what (in this cartoon) has happened to the word "channel." Do we understand the **paradigm crisis** in what has happened, in the world & the liberal synagogue-&-church, to the word "god/God"? Authority crisis! +

5 The Bible rubs in its command/obedience message by its clear **disobedience** alternative: "Unless you repent, you will all perish" (L.13.3,5). Perishing is the alternative to believing-obeying: Jn.3.16; 2P.3.9 (God wants none to "perish, but all to come to repentance": yesterday I read this used as an argument against the death penalty, though the verse gives the death penalty to all impenitents!); Mt.10.28, L.12.5 (God, who can give the soul hell, is for that reason to be more feared than government). How often have I heard "I don't believe in a punishing God"! "Your privilege," I respond; "but it is not your privilege to claim that the Bible's God is nonpunishing..... Don't read your redesigned deity back into the Bible."

6 And speaking of alternatives, the Bible counterposes divine authority over against "**the authorities**" personally (for only God can "probe [Vulg. *probat*] our hearts" [1Thes.2.4; cp.Jer.11.20]), socially, politically (legitimate coercive power being God-ordained [Ro.13.1: "there is no authority except from God"])....The NT's main word for "authority" means "delegated power," & draws together authority/power/right(s).

7 Human freedom/responsibility/accountability exists only as God's self-limiting of his otherwise **absolute power/authority**, a pit of nonbeing for freedom-abusers. The Bible is, for us Christians, the literary form this qualified absolute has taken. Accordingly, its authoritative message is of both severity & grace (Ro.11.22). I speak here severely against (1) those who see no need of grace because they refuse to believe in severity, & also (2) those who believe in the cheap grace of a nondemanding, noncommanding, nonpunishing, emasculated deity foreign to Scripture.

8 What one hearkens to (sees-hears-obeys) is one's authority of both fact & reference. There's a globe in the geography class of our cartoon (over), but "America's students" have the box as their authority in fact (i.e. it has that power over them) & in reference (i.e. it's centrally what they think of & so refer to). That is of a piece with science-&-technology's replacement of religion as Authority Source in the general culture. But the present global reinvigoration of the religions speaks to the failure, indeed the inability, of s.-&-t. to satisfy the human heart.

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS
309 Lake Elizabeth Drive
Craigville MA 02632