# "HOUSE" AS THEOLOGICAL WORD-PICTURE:

## THE "ECONOMIC TRINITY" & THE ECODOMIC CHURCH - ELLIOTT #2080

*Last Sunday (27July86) I preached on world and church as God's "house" (and how we should behave in both as guests) and two days later was asked to edit an encyclopedia article on "God"--an article which used the "house" metaphor (Greek,* eco-*) in the theological phrase the "economic Trinity." What intrigued me was the fact that the article seemed to me to confuse "economic" with (a word it did not use) ecodomic....so a search started inside my head and then snaked through my library. I hope you'll find the results illumining and inspiring: why should I hope for less? They're tentative and fragmentary: I hope to be illumined and inspired by the author's comments after he studies this thinksheet.*

**1. In the whole of early Christian literature through the AF (Apostolic Fathers, only one text--1Tim.1.4--associates house managing ("ecoNOMIC") with house building ("ecoDOMIC"), and that verse does so only across ancient MSS (manuscripts): some (I think the best) have "economic," others (among them some whose readings are often thought best) "ecodomic." A strong reason for preferring the former reading is that the latter can then be explained as a scribal change of one letter ("d" replacing "n") to improve sense, which is known from the context. The context is true v. false teaching. As a content word can easily be extended to the process of conveying the content, here God's "plan"** (oikonomia) **of salvation becomes the teaching of, "upbuilding"** (oikodomia) **in, the plan (= Christian education). Later Fathers in Christian education, esp. in the School of Alexandria, continue this usage: Clement and Origen. This is the single ancient root I can find for presentday theologians' associating economic and ecodomic. I'm enough of a purist to dislike polluting the economic with the ecodomic (so I'd prefer, for this usage, some such word as "econodomic," a horrible neologism); but I'm enough of a realist to sigh and accept this instance of a connotation become a denotation....but on this matter I hope to learn from the author of the "God" article, who is more theologian though less linguist than I am.**

**2. While I'm still in school (the educational motive of the Pastoral Letters, here 1Tim.1.4), let me observe that the alternatives to the teaching of God's "economy" (here, "plan," world-story of salvation) is "searchings," "speculations." The author would demur openly, as I do, when hearing "We're all seeking for God." For the Jew and the Christian, the opposite is true: God is seeking for us, so we can be said to be seeking for God only in a secondary sense (which is, however, an important sense).** Oikonomia **means (as process) organizing a house (family, institution, society, movement, world), managing-administering it, regulating it (ie, making and enforcing the rules), and planning for it (directing it), making arrangements for its prosperity and peace. Now, thought & language closely associate purpose-process & result... so as result,** oikonomia **means office, organization, institution, plan, and job training + evaluation of performance. In universe & church, God is both the household authority** (oikodespotes) **and household manager** (oikonomos) **or trustee or steward (the NT variously referring some of these roles to Jesus as "Lord" and "Servant of God")....Now, within this broad metaphor-analogy, one can easily grasp the contiguity of the ideas of managing and upbuilding: management is a constant battle against the 2nd law of thermodynamics, entropy, the tendency of things to come loose and fall apart instead of being "edified," (lit., in Lat.) built up. Symbolic persons are important in history of religions, so notice PAUL here: he's both proclaimer and teacher of the divine "plan," and church manager of his churches: he's both** oikodomos **and** oikonomos. **It's this dual fact about the historical Paul that encourages the association of the two ideas in the Pastoral Letters (which are deuteroPaul-**

OVER

ine), in ancient Christian schools profoundly Pauline (such as the School of Alexandria), and in presentday Protestant theology (which tends to be more Pauline than does either Roman or Orthodox theology).

3. ASIDE: In the magical papyri contemporary with the earliest Christian literature, oikonomia is secret manipulations to con supernatural powers into doing your will. Some "management"! The reverse of biblical religion, which tries to con us out of doing our will and into doing God's will. Magic & religion are forever enemies, but magic easily leaks into religion (as in the promises of some electronic preachers).

4. The internal aspect of the "economic Trinity" is what we now call team management. The other aspects are (1) cosmic-historical sequence correlation (Father: creation; Son: redemption; Spirit: sanctification) and (2) world-and-church management. Here's the spread of Eng. words translating oikonomia in Eph.3.9, a locus classicus: "fellowship" (Tyndale, Great Bible, Geneva, Bishops'), "dispensation" (Rheims, RV, ASV), "plan" (RSV; with King James staying with "fellowship"),"meaning" (Phillips), "how this hidden purpose was to be put into effect" (NEB), "plan (regarding the Gentiles and providing for the salvation of all men)" (Amplified), "God is the Savior of the Gentiles too, just as He ...secretly planned" (Living), "how the secret purpose is to be worked out" (Chicago), "design" (NAB). TEV goes with the modern term "plan." An old translation, dropped in subsequent edd. of some earlier trs., was "dispensation"--which led straight on to Darbyism (Scofield Bible)! In other contexts the word is sometimes "responsibility," "commission," (in an unpublished 1958 SBLE paper I heard read) "covenant." But note also JB: "how the mystery is to be dispensed."

5. The planning theme is common to a certain postPauline stream: Eph. 1.10 (and perhaps 3.2, but there the office may be mainly in view), Ignatius, Justin, Irenaeus. Eph.3.9 assumes the plan and directs attention to its outworking, what may be called the "administration of salvation" or the "saving order." (Reff.: Kittel 5.152.)

6. The "house" word "economic" contains also the word for "law" (nomos) --which puts the plan-process-structure-execution tone into the word. The "house" word "ecodomic" contains also another word for "house" (domos, not used in NT), as though to rivet attention on what the household needs for its health and progress. In Koiné Greek one must be careful not to make too much of word-segments; but the feel of the elements comes through many of them even though there remains little or no conscious sense of the meanings of the segments as separate words.

7. As we made a process/result analysis of oikonomia (sec.2), here's oikodomia. As process it means constructing, as Jn. in old translations says the temple in Jesus' day was "abuilding" (as well as "a building"). Thus the oikodomos is the contractor, the overseer of the building process. The word "building" is both process (as a gerund) and object--so we pass to result of the building process, viz, the building itself, and metaphorically any "structure" (in the sociopolitical sense) remaining from the building process. Eg, the church as order-and-organization is the result of Jesus' discipling process + the impact of his represencing (the Appearances, and as the Spirit in Pentecost).

8. How do $ get into "economic"? When managerial functions were differentiated into several offices, as they had to be in larger "households" (such as a city, trade guild, or widespread cult--or even in a disciple band such as Jesus'), the one who got called the oikonomos (so "steward," "trustee") was the money manager, accountant....In LXX oikonom. is used of God & Moses; in NY, of apostolic authority.