

As a partisan for Jesus, I was putting the bee on somebody (turned out to be a hotelier from Colorado) Thursday in the Stamford CN RR station, he & I waiting for a train to Manhattan, he to meet a friend from abroad, I to go to work at N.Y.Theol.Seminary. Turned out he wasn't partial to Jesus or any other divine figure: "I'm nonpartisan in religion," says he. That's how I discovered I'm a "partisan" for Jesus: before, I'd heard, as brushoffs, "uncommitted," "nonsectarian," "ecumenical," "nondenominational," "not interested in religion," "agnostic," "atheist," but never "nonpartisan." A side benefit of witnessing is that you almost always learn something, in addition to becoming fascinated with "souls" (people's innermost lives, including their spiritual journeys)....As we were talking, a woman sat down between us--there being no other place to sit--and began to read a book. To her I said, "Your choice. Read, or get in on the conversation. Which?" "The conversation," says she. Yep, another nonpartisan: no religious background, never any religious exploration....When the train pulled up, I said "God bless you both!" & they said "And God bless you!" I left them with something to think about & something to do about their godless nonpartisanship. But that's not the point of this Thinksheet....

1. An exploded diagram of "grace" as process would show the gracious giver, then the gift, then the grateful receiver, then the receiver's gracious giving, then the next receiver's gratitude, then.... All of that was in that railroad-station encounter five days ago. God had been gracious to this sinner Willis. Grace is good will in action: God's gracious action was the sending of his Son to be my Savior & Lord, sending his Spirit to be my Companion, Strengtheners, Comforter, sending his Church to love & enlighten me. For all that grace I was grateful at the time of my conversion & assurance of faith at age sixteen, have been grateful ever since, & will be eternally grateful. But the next stage of the grace process, the grateful receiver's gracious giving of the message of grace, has never been easy for me, a shy person even after eating the kinds of cookies Garrison Keillor recommends as a cure for the condition. Atop of being shy, I'm a very private person, with almost no natural interest in other human beings. But I am determined not to be an ingrate to grace, not to let the grace process that has reached me stop with me. All these years since my conversion I have been, & am now, determined to care about "souls," ie about my fellow human beings from the inside out, a caring that cannot be inconsiderate of the outside, of the relations & conditions of other people's lives.

2. When the Bible's message of God's forgiving love reaches all the way into your soul & resides there, when Christ is "formed within you" (Gal.4¹⁹), you no longer have the luxury of living only for yourself & yours, the greed option. You now know in your heart that the grateful receiver is inherently called to be a gracious giver, a giver of the gracious word & the gracious deed. To be a gracious giver of the deed is not enough: the grateful receiver will not have the word illumining the gift, & the grace process will stop there. And of course to be a gracious giver of the word is not enough: talk is cheap, & the grace process dies with mere verbalization. Truly grateful receivers become, in their entire beings, grace--grace in their words, grace in their deeds. They know that there is nothing in their being & doing that is to be excluded from their stewardship of grace, their trusteeship of the Story of God's suffering, victorious love on behalf of humanity lost in sin & death. They are, to use a battered but unavoidable word, evangelists.

3. So I got off that train & soon ran into two tracts. The second one said, "Jesus Christ, Son of God, make yourself known through me." & "Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, speak through me to others." On the back were two "Prayers for Evangelism." (It was a Forword Movement tract, one of hundreds of splendid tracts of the Episcopal Church.) The first tract said "Are you confused, unhappy, depressed?" Well now, I've never been less confused in my whole life, & I'm far more happy than unhappy, & there's far more in my inner & outer life to excite than to depress me. So I decided I could safely save my \$5 & pass up the ministry of Mrs. Noel Young, 231 Lexington Av., fortune-teller. But notice that though her product was fraudulent, her pitch, her come-on, was right on. She had three hooks on her line. Walk around Manhattan, or anywhere else, & you see a lot of confused, unhappy, depressed

pedestrians to whom Ms. So-&-So, for a mere (starting) \$5, promises help through her manipulating Tarot cards & who knows what else if you fall into her clutches. She & thousands of other cultists promise grace, but it is false grace; it is a grace more of taking than of giving; it is, to put it in an oxymoron, a self-contradictory phrase, greedy grace.

4. But lest we fall into too severe condemnation of religious & occult phonies, consider our own temptation to greedy grace, to getting from God without giving to God what he deserves & wants, viz ourselves, our voices in prayer & praise & witness, our regular worship with his people, our doing with our time & money what we would not do had not "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ" reached us. Here I must mention the open secret that when we do as grace, our gracious response to God's grace, what we would rather not do, we are graced with what I may call a grace **bonus**, a blessing we can know only on the other side of doing what we'd rather not do. You tend to a needy neighbor--someone needing your phonecall, your note, your presence & face-to-face word, your tangible gift--though it would be so easy to let the gracious impulse pass. But you do it, & then how good you feel about yourself & the universe! Then you come to the insight "I didn't want to do that, but I needed to. Stupidly, I almost let my desire defeat my need. I thought I needed what I wanted, viz just to do my thing. Now I see that my real thing, the thing best for me, was to do what I needed to do & didn't know it." Then, with this new self-knowledge, this wisdom from on high & from below, you say to yourself "Here it is money time again in the church year; I'm going to strain myself a little & increase my pledge." Then you may remember Winston Churchill's wise-saying, "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give." We need to give; that is the big truth underneath the little flip-flop truth that we both don't & do want to give.

5. But why do we need to give? Why do we need to care about our neighbors' visible & invisible food, clothing, housing, fears, & hopes? We need to give for three reasons: (1) **Humanitarian justice**, the fact that our neighbors' needs are there & cry out to the universe as loudly as do our own needs; (2) Biblical **duty**, the fact that God tells us to, & our Christian faith-commitment includes obedience to his commandments (in Hebrew, "mitzvot," which is both the commandments & the acts of obedience thereto, including the deeds we'd not do if we were not thinking of God & God's will). Yes, we should obey God, but do we need to? Yes, because we need to avoid having to face the consequences of not obeying, not doing God's will. "Justice" is the word we use in connection with the first need: "judgment" is the word for this second need. God's grace (in Hebrew, "chen") calls & enables us to act out of love & fear, as we obey the laws of the land both because we love our country & fear the police. But are both love & fear necessary? They are if you want to avoid anarchy such as exists where country is not enough loved &/or police are not enough feared. (3) The third reason we need to give is that it's our **nature**, the way God made us. When we're violating our nature, as we are when we're ungiving, ungracious, various sorts of pain & hunger signal the violation: when we're paying attention to & honoring our nature, various sorts of peace & joy signal that we must have been doing something right. We experience the blessing given as rebounding to us in our seeing the fruits of our labors--we are blessed with the urge to thank God (in Hebrew, "todah"), we feel good about ourselves & even better about God, & we are rewarded with delicious deep stirrings of joy (in Greek, "char-a," on the same root as "char-is," which, transliterated, is our English word "grace").

6. The starving find it hard to think of anything but food. Our time is grace-starved, starved of consciousness of God's grace, starved of graciousness in human relations--so we're hearing more & more about grace & graciousness. I've been amazed at how much use a grace saying of mine has been getting: "Grace, God's caring presence, supervenes over and interpenetrates the common day. It is the food within all food, the comfort & strength within all assurance, the song that sings itself within all our moods. To know this is light, to live it is

This Thinksheet was written toward a eucharistic sermon this coming Sunday. Χάρος (char-a) is "joy," & εὐχαριστία (Eu-char-ist[ia]), the Eucharist) is our joyful, grateful, thanksgiving to God in & through the Lord's Supper.

life eternal. The Love that will not let us go will not let us down." And I've been puzzled by the saying's popularity. Yes, it's a channel of calm & comfort & strength in a stormy time for the soul & society. But there's something more. Suddenly, while thinking about our nation's integrity crisis--greedy corruption in government, business, law, medicine, entertainment (including sports), & even in education & religion--it hit me. What hit me you've already seen, in this Thinksheet's title. It's that **when grace loses out, greed wins out**. Greed & its resulting devastations are the price we pay when we refuse, & then seem just to forget, to pay the price of grace. Says sociologist Robt. Bellah (24 CHRISTIANITY TODAY 3 Feb 89), "Americans want the freedom of radical individualism [with all its greeds], but they don't like the consequences." The consequences are the pains signaling the disease, which indeed is the function of pain. "Grace" & "greed" are antonyms of each other, antibodies against each other, enemies. Greed is the liturgy offered up to the secular gods of self-esteem, self-discovery, self-fulfilment. As Midas' touch turned all things to gold, greed turns all things to goods, consumer goods. Human beings consume each other, & reject each other when one or the other falls into product dissatisfaction, human merchandise always being returnable. Religion is just one more consumer commodity, buying God under the most advantageous terms after one has done comparative church-shopping.

7. Notice, too, that while grace is **social**, involving God as the ultimate giver & receiver, & other human beings as givers & receivers, greed is **individualistic**, a lonely business in which nobody exists but the grasper & nobody & nothing is viewed as other than grasped or to be grasped. Note, too, that in this perspective greed includes **lust**, the reduction of sexuality to the commercial level, sex for selfish gratification, & bodies easily used to sell products because the bodies themselves are products to be grasped & consumed. Since real adults have the discipline to defer gratification, the manipulators of greed & lust glorify youth, adolescence, the life stage of maximum urges & minimum controls, when it's easiest to believe that if it feels good it is good & if you want it you are entitled to have it now. As Alexander Astin puts it (60 NW Winter/Spring/90 "The 21st Century Family"), "Preoccupied with their bodies, youth has lost touch with the mental disciplines." In our materialistic, greedy time, youth is a psychospiritual interior condition not limited to bio-youth. Millions of the non-young are struggling to "stay young" by continuing to live with self-absorption, seduced as couch potatoes, sofa spuds, into avoiding the painful process of going on to maturity, to (Ken Woodward) "character, competence and commitment, qualities essential for self-discipline, cooperation and taking care of others" (while KW here is speaking of bio-youth, the same applies to their immature elders; & the bio-youth themselves are, his essay's title, "Young beyond their years," less mature than their elders were in "sex, love, marriage, education and work").

8. Since marketing is interested not in production but in consumption, Mad. Av. has shaped a population more interested in consumption than in production. The results are rising foreign debt, declining ability to compete in world markets, political gridlock (consumers resisting taxation at all levels), lessening quality of life & environment, & diminished destiny for everyone, especially the growing proportion of society's poor.... Having turned from grace, which assumes that we are temptable sinners in danger of becoming contemptible, America has been overwhelmed by one of the seven deadly sins, **avarice**, compulsive acquisitiveness. When 20 years ago in the N.Y. TIMES I defined **consumerism** as an addictive disease, I got a letter from Merriam-Webster saying they'd add my meaning in the next edition of Webster Unabridged. I foresaw that shopping malls would become the churches of millions of Americans, & I grieve that my prophecy came true. We are in a tarnished silver age of greed, our society corrupt with megamillion-\$ lotteries, insider trading, drug lords & littler pushers, get-rich-quick scams, bloated government contracts, graft, litigiousness, & an air-conditioned doghouse of a preacher now doing time instead of preaching eternity. Our corruption is spreading abroad, the world gradually becoming as cynical about America as Americans are. God grant a golden age of grace!