

A TALE OF TWO CHURCHES

It would be grandly appropriate, & a disincentive to the devil, to engrave on the arch over the main entry of every church this cautionary rendering of both Testaments' directive: *You shall love your crooked neighbour / With your crooked heart* (W.H.Auden, COLLECTED POEMS, 1988, p.114). When a church has done its best to make its constituting instruments (charter, constitution, by-laws, confession of faith, financial agreements [including employee contracts]) leakproof, they're still not demonproof. Besides, documents need interpretation. When they're read in the light of "the way we did it before," what's actually considered authoritative is the prior documents, which were in effect when "we" were doing it that way instead of this way: call it **inertial hermeneutics**. The cohort that so reads does so from inattention to the changes or out of disgruntlement that the changes were too radical, & it stands over against the cohort that's out of sorts because the changes were not extensive enough. On hot issues, these extremes dragoon troops out of the middle cohort, the contented, who think the amount of change was just right, and so is less vocal than are the extremes. Here the law of psychophysics is this: On any issue, a society's polarization rises & falls correlative with temperature....What's the polar of inertial hermeneutics? **Radical hermeneutics**, whose cohort eisegetes (reads into the text) what its members had hoped would be there after the changes--reading (to use a phrase from Fawn Hall, Ollie North's secretary) "above the law."

CONCLUSIONS: (1) "Resist the devil, & she will flee from you" (Jas.4⁷, a rendering that is not sexist but psychological: human beings are less defended against the devil than against each other, & each human being is less defended against the opposite sex; ergo, the devil is masculine if you're a woman, & vice versa). When drafting church documents, don't put in sleepers or any other mischief-making, tendentious rhetoric....(2) Try to distance yourself from narcissitic involvement in your precious text, by using the **hermeneutics of suspicion**: "Is our work as honest as we can make it? In what way or ways could anything in it be easily misread: have we plugged all the holes through which church energy could leak & demons could enter?"....(3) When conflict develops over a text because it's unclear, immediately institute a process of clarification: if you let it slide, crooked hearts will become increasingly more bent, including yours....(4) When conflict develops over a text because either the inertial or the radical cohort is, wittingly or unwittingly, trying to impose on the congregation a misreading, the middle cohort should take the lead in confronting the misreader(s)--lest the opposite cohort do so, in which case the devil will have succeeded in shunting the confrontation from issue to personalities....(5) Most dangerous is the case of a pastor who's doing the misreading: unless it's resolved swiftly, the congregation may form itself into an oppositional cohort of the whole, & the pastor's ministry will almost certainly be irreparably damaged....(6) You'll have a kinder, gentler church if, in drafting your documents, you anticipate all the troubles (demons) you can think up. In every church there's resistance to doing this: "Why should we think meanly & ask for trouble?" I say, think realistically & avoid trouble. Most important is the providing for mutual **people/pastor protections**, including intervention processes & structures (one of the latter being a pastoral relations committee, whatever it's called).

#2301 ("Let's see to both THE CHURCH'S BUSINESS and THE BUSINESS OF THE CHURCH!") is good background reading for this Thinksheet. The church's business, including its documents, is a means to the end, which is the business of the church, to which we are called through Jesus Christ our Lord in the Holy Spirit--to **celebrate**, in worship & devotion, the good news of the gospel of God's grace; to **live** it in all our relationships throughout our days; & to **radiate** it with our whole being, including our words, in the world.

I hope I'm about God's business, not the devil's, in narrating the following tale of two churches:

1. It's an advantage, for our purpose, that the two churches could hardly be more ^{over}

different. The first is Roman Catholic, urban (NYC), & huge (ca.13,000, including all baptized, as Catholics do). The second (of which I'm a member), is Protestant (UCC), small-town (Centerville, Cape Cod), & midsize (ca.300). The only crossover is that our present pastor was, before (to use an old phrase) the age of his majority, Roman Catholic. The two pastors have it in common that they are highly gifted & dedicated clergy.

2. The particular local-church, parish, structure involved in my dual tale is the church or parish **council** ("church" the UCC & general Protestant term; "parish," the RC). The problematic is **power-distribution**: while the Spirit's power is infinite, the church/parish's is zero-sum: power cannot be created or imported, it can only be redistributed: if it's given to some/body (ie, some person or group), it must at the same time be taken away from some/body else. (Yes, there are senses in which a church/parish's power is not zero-sum. But on this council question, power is zero-sum.)

3. The two pastors, vis-a-vis their church councils, are opposites. The RC wants to turn over some of his power to the parish council, which has just been created by a democratic process of rewriting the parish by-laws: the UCC wants to retain power for himself & the diaconate by an inertial reading of the church by-laws. It's not a question of right/wrong: maybe they're both right. But in both cases, conflict is unavoidable, & all should pray for the best resolution with the best damage-control. [NOTE: I'm using the present tense for both. The UCC case is current, the RC was some years ago. The priest was a Doctor of Ministry student of mine; I was his mentor on his dissertation, or "action project," which was the whole experience of leading his parish in the creation of a parish council, & I got to put on him his doctoral hood. Recently, the creativity of his parish was praised on a segment of television's "60 Minutes."....I bumped into the parish-council problem also at the RC diocesan level, having been the mentor to a priest who was helping RC bishops in the USA to define "permanent deacons," married laymen, lay men, to be fulltime ministers but without ever becoming priests, who are first "regular deacons." Permanent deacons have a lot to do with parish councils, a structure uncommon in USA RC churches before the 1960s--whereas church councils became common in American mainline Protestant churches immediately after WWII: Catholicism is more reluctant to adapt secular* models--in this case, political & economic--to church purposes.)

4. Congregational-type churches (though UCC, we are "South Congregational Church") are nervous about letting power flow downward from plenum (the pyramid standing on its apex, the pastor being bottom-dog to protect the congregation against **clericalism**, which obtains whenever the pyramid rests on its base); it prefers to face the equal & opposite heresy, **laicism**. The N.Eng. town meeting, a congregational secular product, is guarded against tyranny but not against chaos. In the Town of Barnstable, we're now in the throes of converting from town meeting (248 souls) with three selectmen to council (15 souls or so) + manager (+ a Cape Cod Commission of 1 soul from each of the 15 towns). The old dream of direct democracy dies hard; local political & ecclesial councils are looked on with suspicion....When UCC was formed, I was one of four who wrote a model constitution for a UCC church, melding the four polity-traditions. We worked hard on Article VII, "Council" (pp.2-8, "A Form for Const. and/or By-Laws for a Local Church of the UCC," obtainable from the UCC national office). The article's first sentence is: "The Council shall be the executive body of this church." "The Council shall be the policy-making body and shall transact the business of the church....and report to the church at its regular and special meetings. All acts and deliberations of the Council are subject to the will of and revision by the governing body," the congregation. Trustees are subject to the Council, & Deacons and/or Elders are limited in power: they are only to "assist and support the Pastor in the spiritual affairs of the church." Deacons/Elders are to be on the Council, & "one-half of its members shall constitute a quorum." I have helped convert a number of ecclesial organizations--congregational (a church I was pastor of), denominational, conciliar--to the council type of polity: I believe in it.

* But the ancient Church's "presbyteri-on, -um" ("elders' council") was a sacred precedent.