

A POT OF MESSAGE IS LESS NOURISHING THAN
A MESS OF POTTAGE (Gn.25.29-34)

2851 8.25.97
ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS
309 L. Ellz. Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone/Fax 508.775.8008
Noncommercial reproduction permitted

Gotta cut down on paper tonnage, so recently I threw out a file of over 1,000 sermon-germ notes of sermons never preached (nor converted into Thinksheets).

My heart goes out--halfheartedly--to preachers so Bible-lorn as to feel weekly weekday pressure to cook up some pot of message for Sunday morning & then serve up the gruel in lieu of the Word of the Lord.

To be a "word" (Lat., *Sermo*) from the Lord, the sermon must well up out of the Word of the Lord.

An ancient versicle after reading Scripture (esp. the Gospel) in worship is, "The Word of the Lord" (the response being, "Thanks be to God"). The versicle bespeaks the authority of Scripture in "church," ie, as read in the ears of God's people gathered for worship. The versicle should be taken intentionally (meaning, "God speaks to us in and through the Bible"), not literalistically (meaning, "Every word I've just read to you is from the mouth of God"). To ready the worshipers to this intentionality, I say, before reading, "Let us listen for the Word of God (or, "the Lord")."

1 The authority of the sermon is a function of its source in Scripture & its setting in liturgy (God's people gathered for worship), the spirit of people & preacher, & the working of the Spirit in the Word through the words. Here the authority of the Bible is fully contextual & fully free--not to be ecclesiastically controlled (the Orthodox & Catholic temptation), idolatrously disengaged from the Church (the Protestant temptation, academically secularized into "the Bible as literature"), or empirically demoted (the Inner Light [& "women's experience"] temptation).

2 Before distinguishing "power" & "authority," I ask you to think about something that happened yesterday in these parts (specifically, Martha's Vineyard Tabernacle). What little Jodi, age 5, had in mind as he was walking to worship there with his mother was, "I can hardly wait to tell people, after church, that yesterday was my first day of riding my bike without training wheels!" Knowing that Pres. Clinton would be in attendance, Jodi's mother sought to prepare him by saying "The most important man in the world will be in church today." To which the tyke replied "You mean Daddy's coming to church?"....Jodi's mind was on his little world & the joy of his expanding control within it, viz, 2 wheels instead of 4. Within that world was a man who had power & authority over Jodi, & it wasn't Clinton. In that meeting there was power & authority, & it wasn't Clinton's. And what does "important" mean in the context of Christian worship? Any other thoughts springing from this humorous-profound incident?

3 Speaking of context, the contextual meaning of a word can often be sensed by noting its pairings, words it's paired with. What's the main early Christian word for authority (ἐξουσία *eksousia*) paired with? (1) With "power": Jesus sent his disciples on mission with "power and authority" (L.9.1; & in Rev.13.2, Satan [the dragon] gave his p. & a. to Rome [the beast]); (2) With "commission": Paul traveled "to Damascus with the a. and commission of the chief priests" (Ac.26.12). The disciples, Rome, & Paul were given the ability so to act as to influence. Do all these notes apply to the authority of Scripture (& if so, how)? Pairings is only one of many ways one can learn from a word's context its meaning, & context is only one approach to a word's meaning.

4 Greek & English synonymies make the same basic distinction between "power" (Gk., δύναμις *dynamis*) & "authority": the latter "refers to power resident in or exercised by another than oneself; thus, one may have *power* (not *authority*) to determine one's own actions, but a parent or a master or a ruler has the *authority*...to determine the actions of those under him; so, one is obedient to *authority* (not *power*)..." (underlining mine; WEBSTER'S DICTIONARY OF SYNONYMS. 637)....The Bible has no power (except as "literature") except in those who experience it as conveying the Word of the Lord, & only such effectual authority (in addition to its inherent authority) as those who are set to obey God through it give it, collectively (in the Church as the Body of Christ) & personally.

5 Over the past two centuries, the Bible has been dragged from Ecclesia (the Church, its historical producer & home) to Academia (the universities & such theological schools as the university mentally controls): a new-Babylonian Captivity. It's time for a Return from Exile, for RECLAIMING THE BIBLE FOR THE CHURCH (the title of an Eerdmans/95 bk. ed. by Carl E. Braaten & Robt. W. Jensen). The rest of this Thinksheet will be some remarks on/about the book, the nine-essay product of a 1994 conference bearing the same title as the book.

6 My personal index of the book shows many references to "authority" & "canon"--

the two themes interdetermining. The Bible is the authoritative rule (κανών *kanon*, canon--lit., "straight rod") of-by-for the Church to rule (κυρ- *kūr-* [stem of] "Lord", Ruler) over Christians (corporately [as Body of Christ] & personally/interpersonally), in faith (belief) & practice (behavior), as the literary expression of the Ruler's will under the guidance of his Spirit ("his": the Orthodox, Catholic, & Protestant lecturers at the conference were too Scripture-serious to repress the masculine pronouns for God). (Babylonian Captivity, 69; Trojan horse, 49)

7 **Overview** of the book: (1) The editors: The conference was on "the crisis of biblical authority and interpretation in the church." The historical-critical method was first the Bible's "emancipator from ecclesiastical dogma and blind faith," but then the Bible became its "victim" & "lost its [own] voice." Brevard Childs' "canonical method" restores Bible to church in the Spirit. (2) Childs: The cipher "canon" encompasses the whole semantic debate-field of Scripture, church, Word, & Spirit. "The living, unfettered voice of God in Scripture cannot be held captive to the norms of human rationality" on the right or the left. Irenaeus held word & tradition together, but the 16th-c. West split them into word-Protestantism & tradition-Catholicism; they need reuniting under "the rule of faith," with due regard for both unity & diversity. (3) Karl P. Donfried is concerned about "alien hermeneutics [such as the Jesus Seminar's] and the misappropriation of Scripture....the fallacy of playing the game of historical reconstruction." False hermeneutics he illustrates by the present defanging of the Bible vis-a-vis homosexuality. (4) Roy A. Harrisville: The loss & recovery of biblical authority. (5) Alister E. McGrath against "the papacy of the professors'." (6) Robt. W. Jensen: The Bible lives in the church's liturgy, devotion, & catechesis: the Bible's unity is "available to us only as we attend to the self-identity of the biblical God." (7) Thos. Hopko: The "Holy Tradition" is the proper locus of Scripture. (8) Eliz. Achtemeier distinguishes between fairness feminism & radical feminism. (9) Aidan J. Kavanagh: Scripture & worship are "inseparably linked" functionally & in fate (ie, in high/low appreciation & usage). Emphasize baptism, not ordination. "Neither Word nor liturgy is about meanings....They are manifestations of reality--like a great mountain or a head of lettuce."

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS
309 Lake Elizabeth Drive
Craigville MA 02632

