

"CONFESSING CHRIST" AS ALTERNATIVE-CULTURAL ACTION

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TITUS 2:11-15 NRSV The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all [fn: OR has appeared to all, bringing salvation], training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ [fn: OR of the great God and our Savior]. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. Declare these things."

Once there was a man who told his wife there was a unicorn grazing in the back yard. She said, "You must be crazy." When he persisted, she called for the white jackets to come & straightjacket him & take him away. When they came, they asked him whether there was a unicorn in the back yard. "A unicorn?" he snorted. "One would have to be crazy even to think of such a thing!" So they straightjacketed her & took her away. For the rest of his life, the husband contentedly looked to the needs of the unicorn in the back yard.

My telling, but you will recognize this as a story spun out of the whimsical mind of Jas. Thurber. A psychosocioliterary analysis would be fun, but for our present purpose I point to just two details, neither of them stated & the more powerful for only being implied: (1) The duplicitous husband never inwardly wavered on the experienced fact of the unicorn, & (2) neither his wife nor the white jackets checked the back yard: they were into reality-assuming, not reality-checking....In the words of this Thinksheet's title, the husband was singlemindedly into confessing Christ the Unicorn as an action not just countercultural (a negative) but alternative-cultural (a positive). Singlemindedly: that neat prefeminist ploy of getting rid of his wife. "The grace of God has appeared...." "The unicorn has appeared...." has been seen, experienced, as present!

Of course if the unicorn wandered into the back yard & neither husband nor wife saw it, it would not have appeared: to appear, it would have to be seen by somebody & confessed to be there. Without the seeing, the life of the household would have proceeded unaware that a great new thing had happened, & right there in their own back yard! What would have happened in the house if one of the occupants had seen the unicorn & said nothing? The seer might have some roiling going on inside, but the couple's assumed world & life together would have been virtually undisturbed--as is the life of the church & of the world when Christ the Unicorn is present but not confessed, openly affirmed.

1 At the beginning of #2641 I reported what happened when over the phone I read our passage, Titus 2.11-15, to an atheist in Princeton, NJ. He's not yet ready to check out the back yard for the Unicorn. Three days ago I quoted the passage to two late twentysomethings on an Amtrak train between Sacramento & Walnut Creek, Cal. They were polishing off a six-pack, & I said to them "How is it between you & **God**?" Their round eyes looked at me & said what that Thurber wife said to her husband, "You must be crazy!" They held onto their opened beers but for the 1½ hours of the run didn't take another sip. First it had to come clear to them that I wasn't talking about some girl named Grace. Then, when they got the idea that I was telling them there was something wrong with them that they couldn't fix, they protested & presented me with a short list of their righteousnesses. One said "I'm good enough to go to heaven if there is one." And the other said "I'm good enough to choose, but I'd rather go to hell, because there are more good people there." I kept the conversation tethered, though with a long leash, to the Story of God's making & in Christ fixing the world, us when we confess we cannot fix ourselves & the world. After about an hour, one of them said "I wish this weren't our second sixpack: I'd like to think more clearly about all this." At conversation's end they were in a mood to check out the back yard.

2 It's the first week in Advent '93, & our Titus passage is a ringer for it: Advent is appearance, & "the grace of God has appeared." The incarnation occurred, but grace did not appear till God's saving purpose & presence in Jesus Christ was recognized & confessed. Our passage states the recognition & is itself an instance of confessing Christ & declaring grace's implications for life.

A just-received Advent-Christmas letter begins with this passage. When I told the sender about the Amtrak use of the passage, he reminded me that 56

years ago, in the first session of our systematic theology course, Prof. Frank Wright assigned us to memorize Titus 2.11-15 for the second session. Two observations: (1) That old professor, whom I used to converse with evenings as he milked his cow, thought that when it comes to theology, this passage from the NT's third pastoral letter just about says it all; & (2) Memorized texts are easy to access: my longtime good friend accessed the passage for his Advent-Christmas letter, & I accessed it when asked to lead this Bible study.

3 Our passage is, as I put it in my commentary on the Pastoral Letters, imperative instruction "as a response to grace: The free and saving (or healing) love of God is the motivation and power for discipline and obedience, negative and positive....explaining Christ's sacrifice as being made to redeem us negatively and positively" (pp.107f UCP/64). The author of the Pastoral Letters aims to guide Christian leaders whose ministries were endangered by cultural captivity, by accomodationism, by conformity to the spirit, categories, & goals of the world, & by neglect of "the scriptures." He could have written much of the "Confessing Christ" letter you all received & to which your presence is a response. From that letter, the CHRISTIAN CENTURY 1 Dec 93 quotes this: "We view this indifference to Scripture and debilitating amnesia as a threat to the gospel."

4 To bring out the **corrective** force of our text, I've given it this dynamic-equivalence translation: "In Jesus Christ, the grace of God eager to save all humanity has dawned. God's gift, it calls us from gloomy reflections on what the world has come to to joyful gratitude for what has come to the world. It is an ever-present tutor stimulating us to renounce secularism, selfish passions, & current conventional enthusiasms & to live resolutely, justly, & devoutly in this present age while waiting to welcome the consummation of the blessed hope, the dawning of the glory of our great God & Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness & purify for himself a people belonging only to himself, who are eager to do good. Let this be your message, these your themes."....The little letter we call Titus is eager to do a specific good, viz to demonstrate & inculcate a sane, sound, steady hold on Christian theological & ethical *essentials* with their built-in motivations for Christian believing & living. Built into the indicative of the once-for-all **event** of grace, ie the incarnation, life, death, & resurrection of our Lord, are the imperatives of working & waiting, **action** & **anticipation**. Ethics is rooted in redemption & flowers in the victories of grace over sin, the principalities & powers, & death itself.

5 Our text has **rotundity**, fullness, gospel completeness. It does not lend itself to hobby preaching or to the reductionisms now plaguing the churches. To "confess Christ" in the canonical-confessional-creedal sense is to honor this full gospel in proclamation, witness, & individual & collective life.

Let's have a look at reductionisms to be avoided, using our text:

Theological....What the text says about the being & doings of God & Jesus is, to outsiders, as strange as to say there's an unicorn in the back yard. Language is symbolic action (the title of Ken. Burke's 1966 book). Those who don't use the biblical language lose it: the unicorn dies from inattention. In liberal churches, some have never learned Bible-speak, so don't know Bible-think & can't use Bible-talk. For Christians, life-long Bible study is necessary to the cultivation of Christian "symbolic action." Christians who are dumb (ie, speechless) are so more from illiteracy than from unbelief.

Ethical....Many mainline Christians have, as their religion, being "zealous for good deeds." They are "eager to do good" because of humanitarian goodwill, but not also or primarily as grace-fulness responding to grace. These are children of a looser God. They can tilt a church's culture as some prisons tilt from the culture of the warden to the culture of the prisoners. Then the hymns are the Lord's song sung in a strange land.

The three adverbs in v.12 together describe Christian wholeness. But taken separately, they signal reductionisms: (1) to one's individual sphere & character (σωφρον. *sophron*. [Stoic] self-control, resoluteness), (2) to concern for "justice & peace" (δικαι. *dikai*. right-eousness), (3) to "spirituality" (εὐσεβ. *eu-seb*. do-it-yourself inner religion)--each three a word-corruption.

Crazy Times

The following is a previously unpublished letter, dated Nov. 12, 1959, from the psychologist C. G. Jung to Ruth Topping, a prominent Chicago social worker. She had asked him to explain a comment of his in a Chicago newspaper: "Among all my patients in the second half of life . . . every one of them fell ill because he had lost what the living religions of every age have given their followers, and none of them has been really healed who did not regain his religious outlook." In her letter, Miss Topping wondered how Jung would define the phrase "religious outlook."

By C. G. Jung

WHEN you study the mental history of the world, you see that people since times immemorial had a general teaching or doctrine about the wholeness of the world. Originally and down to our days, they were considered to be holy traditions taught to the young people as a preparation for their future life. This has been the case in primitive tribes as well as in highly differentiated civilizations. The teaching had

always a "philosophical" and "ethical" aspect.

In our civilization this spiritual background has gone astray. Our Christian doctrine has lost its grip to an appalling extent, chiefly because people don't understand it any more. Thus one of the most important instinctual activities of our mind has lost its object.

As these views deal with the world as a whole, they create also a wholeness of the individual, so much so, that for instance a primitive tribe loses its vitality, when it is deprived of its specific religious outlook. People are no more rooted in their world and lose

their orientation. They just drift. That is very much our condition, too. The need for a meaning of their lives remains unanswered, because the rational, biological goals are unable to express the irrational wholeness of human life. Thus life loses its meaning.

Loss of faith, loss of meaning.

That is the problem of the "religious outlook" in a nutshell.

The problem itself cannot be settled by a few slogans. It demands concentrated attention, much mental work and, above all, patience, the rarest thing in our restless and crazy time. □

On my monthly commuter train into Grand Central the Thursday before Thanksgiving Day I clipped this from the NYT OpEd. Jung's point is clear: no wholeness of vision-understanding within a nation, no whole people. No "religious outlook" comprehending reality, no well people. When "people are no more [ie, longer] rooted in their world"-view, they "lose their orientation....drift....The need for a meaning of their lives remains unanswered....life loses its meaning." Turning to another part of the paper, I read of a deep-South town whose biblical wholeness is sustaining "community values" except in the public high school, where chaos, including gun-toting students, reigns. The students themselves, thinking that opening the schoolday with intercom prayer might at least have a calming effect, got the principal's permission to read a nondenominational brief prayer. What happened after the third day? The schoolboard stopped the innovation? Not only that: the board suspended the principal, who was also superintendent of schools! The subculture of the board (& the public-educational establishment behind it, with the instant help of ACLU) canceled the culture of the community, including the students, who'd overwhelmingly voted for opening prayer.

In America today, wholeness--religious, cultural, civil--is being lost not only to forces patently evil but also to well-intentioned advocacies taking advantage of the complexities of life in our multicultural land.

In this Thinksheet, my intention is to put grace & wholeness side by side in hope of interillumination.

1 "Things occur in human life that would seem to be UNfavorable to wholeness." I can still, after 40 years, see the not-whole man begin his lecture with those words. Not whole: he was missing a shoulder, & of course everything that had hung from it. Shot off him, a German medic, in WWI. A Christian psychiatrist in Berlin, who was giving a series of lectures in the U.S. Fritz Kunkel.

While he would have agreed with Jung's cultural comment, Fritz's sense of wholeness was, as Jung's was not, evangelic: wholeness is a characteristic neither of a culture nor of certain evolved or realized or mature individuals; it is

a gift of grace. The "whole need not a physician" (Mt.9.12, M.2.17, L.5.31), but none are whole without the grace of God; & those who by nature or accident or inhumanity are not whole in body or even mind may be, by grace, whole in soul, & healers.

2 The modern author who for me best marries grace & wholeness is Flannery O'Connor, whose stories are laden with UNwholeness but with grace moving around underneath & sometimes peeking through. Robt. Coles likes to quote her as saying that the purpose of fiction is "to deepen mystery," & her tragicomedies do that. When I asked Frederick Buechner about her oeuvre, he brightened & immediately told "Revelation."....In A GRIEF OBSERVED, C.S. Lewis says that the grace that delivered him from early-life atheism worked through the logic of theism but even more through otherwise inexplicable upsurges of happiness, sometimes even of joy....For a poetry evening, I was in the home of Amos Wilder $\frac{1}{2}$ century ago next Tuesday. He was reading aloud his brother Thornton's poetry, but I was thinking of Amos': "Thanks be to God / to see beyond these snows / the clemencies of God, / the lily and the rose." "Clemencies," what a beautiful word for grace!

3 In America, the goddess is back & her name is Hygeia: skyrocketing health costs deepen "the health crisis" as Americans are **health-worshippers**. As a semantic field, health exercises a great sucking sound on many words. The rare Eng. word "wholeness" has become common for "complete health" & has contributed its suffix to the ugly neologism "wellness." But it cannot suck in "grace," which appears more often through UNwholeness, UNwellness, such as Flannery O'Connor's lupus. And weakness: "when I am weak, then am I strong" (2Cor.12.10). Gideon had to be weakened, that the victory might be seen to be God's--a truth Paddy Chaevsky raised to the ridiculous in his play "Gideon" by making this military commander a halfwit. (For the B'way premier, I saw him come stage drunk after the play: from fear of flop? And Playbill had on its cover his words: "CREED: I believe in kindness [grace!] and that old men and women should be kept cool in the summer and warm in the winter.")

4 But while "grace" is not reducible to the therapeutic semantic domain, grace has a place in therapy. In New Haven last week, Sally Bailey of Hospice Connecticut handed me a program on which this grace-saying of mine was printed: Where here is wholeness?

In God's caring for "the common day."

In all food, all assurance, all moods.

In the Love that will not let us go while we want it to hold us, & will not let us down when we want it to hold us up.

Here is grace as **comfort** and **strength**, comfort in sorrow & strength in weakness.

Part of the saying's hypotext is the truth that in the two-player world of the strong

and the weak, grace weighs in on the side of the weak. That, for us Christians, is both fact & assignment.

Grace,

God's caring Presence,

supervenes over and interpenetrates the common day.

It is the food within all food,

*the comfort and strength within all assurance,
the song that sings itself within all our moods.*

To know this is light,

to live it is life eternal.

*The Love that will not let us go
will not let us down.*

5 As almost all the early Christians were Greek-speaking, & their main word for "joy" was $\chi\alpha\rho\acute{\alpha}$ *chara*, which is on the same root-stem as their word for "grace" ($\chi\alpha\rho\iota\varsigma$ *charis*), they could not think grace without feeling joy! "JOY to the world, / the Lord has come!" Those joy-bringing, grace-announcing Christmas angels must have astonished those shepherds as much as...as...that unicorn in the back yard astonished & delighted Thurber's crazy husband. He was crazy, wasn't he? Or did a New Reality break in on him? had a New World gotten through to him? I think he must have sung for joy, or at least hummed, while seeing to the needs of that unicorn, the Unicorn.