

This Thinksheet is some first-thoughts toward a 3-day (2-night) UCC "Confessing Christ" theological consultation to surface & critique theological agreements & differences among us in this movement to re-mind & re-new our church. The reminding includes a call to faithfulness to our founding vision & commitment as a church which "claims as its own the faith of the historic Church expressed in the ancient creeds and reclaimed in the basic insights of the Protestant Reformers," acknowledging "as its sole Head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Saviour," "look[ing] to the Word of God in the Scriptures, and to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, to prosper its creative and redemptive work in the world." (§2, Preamble, The Constitution of the United Church of Christ)

The consultation's planning committee invites Confessing Christ Steering Committee members to help shape the consultation by commenting on the first-draft questions: (1) How do we understand the authority of Scripture? of tradition? of experience? What is the relationship among these? (2) By what criterion or criteria do you accept or reject an interpretation of Scripture? (3) How does Christian spirituality differ from spirituality in general (ie, human spirituality)? (4) What is the Christian understanding of the self? (5) On what authority is the work of the minister (ie, congregational pastor) based?

1 Bridges are built from both sides simultaneously. Always & everywhere, Christian witness in & to the world has striven both to shape the world by the message & shape the message to the world: the bridge must fit where it's joined (or, more abstractly, Tillich's principle of correlation). Through this double action, Christ is "formed" in his followers (Gal.4.19), who are to resist overaccomodation, ie, being "con-formed to this world" while being "trans-formed by the renewing of your minds" (Ro.12.2). The **double peril** to be avoided can be viewed by an extension of our metaphor: the structural members of bridges must be both firm & flexible. We Christians are to eschew both fundamentalist rigidity & relativistic flaccidity.

We in the Confessing Christ movement believe that in our beloved church, the theological bridge is sagging from the anything-goes, latitudinarian mentality. "Celebrating diversity" has been stretched, in the name of antirigorism, to include some ranges of opinion wildly at odds with canonical (ie, biblical) classical (ie, ecumenical creeds & church-family confessions) Christian thought, "the mind of the Church & the church." Many outsiders, & increasing numbers of insiders to our church, see us sliding toward the pan-religiousness of the Unitarian-Universalist Association &, paradoxically, into a new sectarianism (the radical feminism--amounting to a new religion--of THE NEW CENTURY HYMNAL).

2 All criticism--esthetic, literary, philosophical, religious, ethical, social, political--depends on "certain indispensable concepts: 'ought,' 'should,' 'is,' and 'is not'." These distinguish between the ideal and the actual....Even the most extreme relativist" has "standards whether of law, morality, or taste" & must deal with "right and wrong, good and bad, valid and invalid, successful and unsuccessful." (89, Albert Hofstadter's TRUTH AND ART, Minerva Press/65)

Another way to put this--the way of this Thinksheet & the upcoming consultation--is this: The basis (literally, "foundation" [1Cor.3.11]) of criticism, of critical thinking, of the use of analytical intelligence, is whoever/whatever, for the particular thinker, is **authoritative**. Negatively put, the uncritical ("nonjudgmental") attitude & praxis is unable to say "No!" For persons of this ilk, the Bible's most blessed verse is Mt.7.1. But if nothing is out of bounds, there are no bounds defining in/out: everything & everybody is "in," & the holiest word is "inclusive." To have integrity & health, a person & a community, must have self-definition over against the not-self. Else the identity questions--Who am I? Who are we?--are unanswerable. And existence without identity is shadowy, insubstantial, flaccid, powerless, joyless, peaceless, aimless (the last, a diagnosis incorporated into the UCC Statement of Faith).

3 Because our church's Constitution's Preamble, as in this Thinksheet's 1st ¶, is an increasing embarrassment in our theologically "inclusive" membership (inadequate,

2847 if any, catechesis, being practiced to form the mind/spirit before joining the church),
2 a move is afoot to remove the embarrassment by revising, "updating," re-forming the Preamble. If successful, what will eventuate is either the dissolution of our denomination or its fragmentation, which would amount to about the same thing.

4 The Synoptics (references immediately after this Thinksheet's title) show Jesus, while teaching in the temple, challenged as to the **ground** of his teaching (all three accounts ending with his refusal to state "on what authority?"). (The Fourth Gospel's rough parallel: After Jesus' cleansing of the temple, he faces this challenge [2.18]: "What sign can you show us for doing this?" His reply is oracularly ambiguous, becoming clear to his disciples only after his resurrection [v.22].)

While some translations have "On" (as does this Thinksheet & the upcoming consultation), most have "By what authority?" (The Greek *ἐν* *en* is patient of either.) "On" is to be preferred in an argumentative context: what foundation (or ground) do you have on which you can build an argument for teaching as you do in the temple? Note, please, the parallel in the last sentence of this Thinksheet's 2nd ¶: How shall congregational pastors argue for, build a case for, claim, their authority?

Note also (immediately below this Thinksheet's title) that TEV (Today's English Version) casts the question in contemporary "rights" language. So does its putative successor, CEV (Contemporary English Version), which in all three Gospels has the same wording as TEV except that the last word is not "right" but "authority."

Further, "By" is not picture-language, as "On" (the building metaphor) is.

5 Early Christian leaders (including the NT's authors) gave 23 different answers to this On-what-authority? question. The 23 can be looked at as grounds or (in the legal-evidentiary sense) warrants or (in the psychological sense) motivators/incentives or (in the behavioral-ethical sense) sanctions. Their authorization was their call (vocation) to Christian leadership; their authority was a function of the use they made of the 23 (I'll call them) **sanctions** (as I do in my U. of Chicago PhD dissertation: SANCTIONS IN THE CONTROL-LITERATURE OF POSTAPOSTOLIC-PRECATHOLIC CHRISTIAN LEADERS).

Of the 23 sanctions, 4 are **ultimate** & as such can be argued *from*; the rest are sanctions of **consequence** & need to be argued *for*. Further, the 4 have priority: a leader will not use a weaker, consequence-sanction if he can call on a stronger, direct-ultimate one. ("He": no evidence of any women authors in extant early-Christian-leadership literature.)

6 For the purposes of this Thinksheet & consultation, I'll limit myself to describing the 4 ultimate sanctions (p.184): "Does this leader support his message by appeals to the character, name, works, words, or will of God (**divine** sanction) or of Jesus Christ (**dominical** sanction)? Does he make persuasive use of tradition as such (**scriptural** & **apostolic** sanctions)?" The order is of declining force (except that in some authors, the dominical sanction is even weightier than the divine). Today's theologians, too, give priority to the divine sanction, as a perusal of recent systematic theologies indicates.

7 Beware! Pulling the divine sanction can be deadly to discourse. Eg, the abortion "debate" is not that for those who argue that God is against abortion (so what does that make you if you're not against abortion: a fighter against God!). Danger! Those who use the divine sanction to support their social, economic, political, philosophical, or religious notions--if they face no challenges to their claims--by their own monologic & monolog elevate themselves above discourse/debate/reason--& succumb to arrogance & then perhaps to violence: having victimized themselves beyond rationality, they proceed to victimize others.

8 This Thinksheet's aim (finally!) is to increase awareness of how, now among us, **God** (the divine sanction) is **getting used/abused/misused**. Unless we think our theology should be like our underwear, not seen in public, we all use the divine sanction, & we all need help in the fellowship of the saints to improve our use thereof. (A few evenings ago, speaking before Cape Cod's Conservation Commission, I referred to "God's good earth," implying that it's God's will that we so comport ourselves as to keep the earth good & so glorify God. A simple, public use of the divine sanction--& the only use of it in a very long public-secular meeting.)

2847.3 9 Here we face a speech-difficulty in our culture--not some physical disability in the forming of clear speech-sounds, but the public-school-learned **godless** way of thinking-&-speaking. A decreasing % of America's children learn to speak godily at home or private religious school or even Sunday school: god-talk is for them a foreign tongue. A long-drawn-out meeting of Cape Cod's highly competent (& volunteer!) conservation commissioners may not mention the elephant in the parlor even though they all may be aware that the bottom-line, ultimate sanction for caring about the environment is that "The earth is the LORD's" (Ps.24.1) & (to use a commercial figure) we're all renters, responsible to the Owner for keeping up the property. But the secular language-game forbids any allusion to the Elephant. (Cultural-linguistic stages: [1] God-talk but not sex-talk; [2] Both; [3] Sex-talk but not God-talk.)

10 Think/talk are Siamese twins with only one heart: if one dies, so does the other. People stop thinking about what's not talked about, & don't talk about what they don't think. In the Craigville Tabernacle recently, Wm. McKinney, pres. of the Pacific School of Religion, spoke of our religion's need of a "public voice." If the mainline churches don't speak while others (secularists, the so-called religious right, etc.) are speaking, in the public mind we cease to exist. Witness (testimony & evangelism) are not optional to continued existence. But what catechesis can provide an intellectual-spiritual formation leading to a kind of God-talk that sounds, in secular ears, something other than pious twaddle?

To put it sociodynamically, we are in a *Sprachweltkampf*, a world clashing-&-competing of language-worlds. For Christians, the Bible provides Basic Christian (a take-off from Basic English). But forces around & even within the churches challenge BC (Basic Christian) as lacking certain modern sensitivities bruited as morally superior to Scripture. (Eg, though BC *always* uses the masculine [never the feminine or neuter] when speaking pronominally of God, UCC church leaders *never* do!)

11 Please refer back to §6. The God-lover's highest sanction, the God-sanction ("divine sanction"), uses "the character, name, works, words, or will of God." Seriatim, lets turn those nouns into questions: What is God like? What's his name? What has he done / is he doing? What has he said / is he saying? What does he want me/us to do, & what will be because he wants it? The God-lover *lives* these questions --prayerfully searches Scripture for answers to them, interprets self & society in light of them, lets them shape love & work & play & hope--&, while welcoming new knowledge & insights from all quarters, exercises a "hermeneutics of suspicion" on any ideas at serious **variance** from the Bible's basic answers to these questions.

12 Instead of looking directly at a few of these alien ideas, let's notice how they've leaked down into the Church from failure of roof-maintenance (to shift to another metaphor, the watchdog function of the official intellectuals). Out of eagerness to communicate the Good News of the gospel, & out of self-congratulation at being culturally "with it," some Christian thinkers (& church leaders whom they influence) become, to a greater or less degree, "conformed to this world [or "age"]" (Ro.12.2).

(1) The humanistic idea of universal **benevolence** & nonjudgmentality, in the sunny light of reason, has weakened & even derogated the dark side of God, who biblically is Bad News in order to become Good News. The resulting sunny deity has no truck with sin-repentance-confession. In the Tabernacle today (8.3.97), a cochaplain read "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." And we responded "But if we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins...." Said deity is *not* unconditionally benevolent, will *not* forgive unconfessed sins, is bad news to impenitent sinners, is "the Judge of all the earth" (Gn.18.25), wills that things go wrong for those who will to do their own will rather than his will, rules with righteousness & holiness as King of time & space, communicates his character/name/works/words/will (&, supremely, comes as a man, "the Man Christ Jesus," to do so)....In much feminist theology, this dark side of God ("severe": Ro.11.22) is called, instead, the masculine side, or even character, of the (patriarchal-androcentric-biblical God; & the project is to discover (or design) a female-friendly, or feminine, or at least gender-neutral deity in or outside of the Bible.

(2) Three days ago, our preacher of this morning, having returned from Africa yesterday, was in a Masai hut with 23 computers & no people, no batteries, no

2847.4 problem: the Masai aren't interested in the latest "Western" salvation-by-technology. As early as 1747 (in LaMettrie's L'HOMME MACHINE), Western **materialism** was preaching that humanity is nothing but refined matter; thought ("mind") is a function of matter ("brain") & does not have its source in God or the soul. The processes of matter-thinking (post-medieval "science") leaked into the humanities (where today most PhDs require a statistical dimension), where it shrank religion down to ethics (as Jefferson's "Bible" eliminated the "dung" of miracle saving only the "diamonds" of morality), & (as in the "Jesus Seminar") imprisoned "history" in historicism (ie, scientistic historiography)....This mentality continues to infect much liberal hermeneutics: what you don't like in the Bible (eg, that it's deity is a god, not a goddess or gender-neutral) you put on the "Dung" heap, retaining what you do like for the "Diamonds" pile. By this convenient device, the answer to "On what authority?" is "On the authority of the diamonds pile." But since what makes it onto the diamonds pile does so by sheerly subjective decision-making, the question collapses into solipsism ("On my authority...") or that collective solipsism we call ideology ("On our authority..."). If 1Cor.11.7 makes it impossible to say that "the Bible" teaches that women & men are equally in the image of God, the problem is solved by assigning that verse to the "Dung" heap, to that degree shortening the Bible (as Jefferson shortened the Gospels). As a biblical scholar, I am appalled at the cavalier fashion in which Bible-violating generalizations about the Bible are foisted onto the biblically ignorant. I can understand it when hearing that a few months ago, when installed as professor of NT in a UCC seminary, a woman said "The Bible is no authority for me." (And her primary job, as a seminary professor, is to produce pastors--for whom persumably, in their preaching-teaching-counseling-managing, the Bible will be no authority!)....My image for this I-decide attitude is a thumb: the Nazi thumb which, in the film "Sophie's Choice," indicated whether you were to die immediately or later. The canon-of-your-choice Bible is a dead Bible for a dead church.

(3) The Bible does not lose its authority if "**inclusive language**" translating is (as in the New Revised Standard Version) limited to the horizontal-interhuman (& forbidden vertically, ie, in addressing, & pronominally speaking about, the deity). But **literalism on the left** (an aspect of fundamentalism on the left) insists on vertical inclusive language, on the grounds (a) that people today will read the masculinity of the biblical God as maleness (in spite of the fact that the Bible forbids that), & (b) that women today will "feel not included" unless the church's God-talk (in liturgy, theology, & even Bible-translation) is nonmasculine. In the past, the maleness-misunderstanding was avoided/corrected by Christian education: the feminist proposal is to accept the misunderstanding as unavoidable, & resolve the dilemma ("solve" the problem) by dissolving the biblical deity's masculinity, a move made easy by the aforementioned severe reduction of the authority of the biblical canon (ie, the Bible as an entity, in its entirety, unbowdlerized [ie, parts found uncomfortable/embarrassing not scissored out]). The canon question is the heart of the authority question vis-a-vis the Bible....The issue is not to be confused with fundamentalism-on-the-right's test-question "Do you believe the Bible, all of it?" To which I occasionally rejoin, "Do I have to believe the parts where the Bible disagrees with itself?" Rather, the issue is whether one believes the hypotext, the tenor (musical sense) of Scripture running under & upholding the whole. Eg, "born of the Virgin Mary" (from the 1st & 3rd Gospels) is in the text of the basic Christian creeds, but some in the UCC's "Confessing Christ" do not believe it "really [ie, biologically] happened": they do not believe the text, which says that Mother Mary was impregnated by the deity functioning as male & so was "with child through the Holy Spirit" (Mt.1.18 NIV [NRSV has "from"]: in the NT, the Holy Spirit is the only member of the Trinity ever functioning as male--ironic, in light of feminist efforts to claim the Holy Spirit for feminine or at least neuter, "Father" & "Son" being for this purpose hopeless cases). If the hermeneut chooses to take the Virgin Birth as an origin-myth, an etiological tale, of the Incarnation (literally, God coming "in [the] flesh": the Incarnation being the primary hypotext of a basic Christian belief), what remains unavoidable is that the early Christians were so familiar with, & accepting of, the masculinity of God that the Virgin Birth story seemed plausible. Of course they believed that the God who was to be addressed primarily as masculine & pronominally referred exclusively as masculine was (a) the Source of both sexes & (b) personally beyond sexual limitation

2847.5 (Is.55.8-9: "my thoughts are not your thoughts...my thoughts [are higher] than your thoughts"; the context is how God will redeem Israel, but the metaphysical meaning is a legitimate extension of the enjoined humility). When I'm told I should "feel the pain" of women who "feel excluded" from the Bible's dominantly masculine language for God, I sometimes reply thus: "The pain is not too great to impede their having, today as in all previous generations, greater enthusiasm for the Christian religion than men had/have." That women will leave Christianity unless the deity is redesigned feministically is a farcical notion, wildly deviant from reality. That the deity should be so redesigned is a worldly (radical-feminist) conceit that has leaked through the churchroof & convinced an astonishing number of liberal-church leaders to tabu (put a hex on) any use of masculine pronouns for God. Betwixt times, I weep & laugh at this anomaly, a recent novelty in the history of heresy. What squelches my laughter is the thought that the tabu **trains the troops to be alienated** from the way the Bible speaks of God, & thus also from the Bible, & thus also from God. The children's children, in this false tradition, will think of the Bible only as a quaint book their grandparents, inexplicably, took seriously. And the generation after that will not think of the Bible at all: human beings are always only one generation from barbarism & two generations from amnesia (as in Russell Oben's RIDDLEY WALKER). I fear the "Confessing Christ" consultation on authority will only agree to disagree on this issue, rather than facing it.

(4) The authority question is affected by a polar tendency of the human mind to contract/expand meaning. Let's call the former semantic shrinkage & the latter, semantic spread.

(a) In baptismal practice, the world's churches resist **semantic shrinkage** in the ritual (ie, the words "in the name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit"), but most of them accept it in ceremonial (ie, the baptismal action). Pressure to shrink the ritual by substituting novelties is limited to radical feminists. But the early Christian baptismal ceremonial, viz, immersion, is now little practiced: most Christians are "baptized" without immersion (though the NT word means "immersed"). The central argument for the shrinkage is that the essence of the ceremonial is the use of water--though in the NT the meaning of the ceremonial is identification with Christ's burial & resurrection: the candidate "goes down" into death (the water-tomb) & "rises up out of" the water into newness of life (the action specified in, eg, Ro.6.4, Col.2.12--in the latter v., Jörg Zink has *getaucht* "submerged").

Being a rigorist in both ritual & ceremonial, I complain against semantic shrinkage in either. I am against the latitudinarianism (really, reductionism) that would call a baptism Christian even though not in the trinitarian Name, or the erection of churches with no provision for immersion. (The church I designed, in both building & constitution, & pastored the people of for more than a decade, has a baptistry resting at nave level in front of the altar, which is elevated seven steps above the nave level--the cover being the platform....No, it's not, never has been, a baptist church: it's UCC....My rigorism was in theory, not practice: as requested, I also affused, aspersed, &--in the case of nonconfessors [ie, infants]--"dedicated" waterlessly. Each congregation is a local ecumene, the whole Church in that place; & its practices should be wide enough to reflect that fact.)

My almost-½-century-old church-building story reveals me as a longtime warrior against semantic shrinkage. No one should wonder that the present liberal-church pronominal shrinkage of God-talk, in 180° variance from Scripture, enrages & saddens me....Elsewhere in this Thinksheet I complained against the semantic shrinkage of the biblical God from dark("severe")/light("kind") to only light, sweetness & light. As for Jefferson's semantic reduction of the Gospels from religion to ethics, that applies also now to much of mainline religion, which tries to whip into action troops that have not even enlisted (ie, been converted, through repentance & faith).

(b) Rain on dry ground spreads wide & deep: **semantic spread** occurs when an idea falls on an idea-thirsty mind. That is merely a psychospiritual fact, nothing to glory in or mourn. It is both a frightening fact (explaining tyrannies of the mind, personal & societal obsessions) & a bracing fact (opening the thirsty soul to divine revelation [Ps.42.1-2] & society toward "a new heaven and a new earth" [Rev.21.1]). Eg, if the meaning (sememe) of "murder" is spread (expanded) to in-

2847.6 clude abortion, all the homicide laws descend upon the pates of the putative murderers (the pregnant, her "abortionist," & the "abortion industry"). We free-choicers object to this (as we see it) semantic trick that enrages a significant portion of the American populace, but the anti-choicers rejoin with a divine-sanctional syllogism: God as well as government is against murder; abortion is murder; therefore, God is against abortion & all those who have anything to do with it. (The invoking of the divine sanction virtually eliminates debate: the abortion issue is intellectually intractable & politically horrifying.)

This returns us to the divine sanction, now in the context of semantic spread. For this part of this Thinksheet, I ask you to imagine the theological use of the divine sanction in terms of a **house** whose 1st floor is Scripture (& the tradition[s] within its canon); 2nd floor, premodern layerings on the Bible (such as Greek philosophy's structural contribution to Trinity thinking, & Latin jurisprudence's development with the help of Aristotle's "natural law" idea in the hands especially of Augustine & Thomas [Aristotelian-Thomistic thought]); 3rd floor, modern layerings (such as societal inferences from the sociality of the Trinity, liberation theology, & feminist theology)--an open stairwell rendering all floors visible & influential to all. My primary expertise & guardianship is of the 1st floor: Bible abuse or neglect lights my rocket.

13 **Revelation** in *particular* (in addition to general revelation, of which both Testaments speak) is about a particular deity, the biblical God, who as a concept is the product of a long & complex historical development both of semantic shrinkage (eg, from gods to God, whether or not there was an original monotheism) & of semantic spread (eg, to include certain characteristics of non-Israelite gods & goddesses). This historical-process revealing includes limits on contraction (eg, this deity's not to be depersonalized, as in process philosophy-theology) & expansion (eg, this deity's not to include being addressed, or pronominally referred to, as feminine, only as masculine). Deviations from these limits as much deserve to be called heresies as, in christology, are deviations from the painfully-carefully worked out descriptions, in the first few Christian centuries, of the nature & work of Jesus Christ. While particular (& general) revelation does not cease when one ascends the theological house onto the 2nd & 3rd floors, nothing can be orthodoxly considered revelation on those floors which contradicts primary (1st-floor) revelation. (Let's call 2nd-floor revelation secondary & 3rd floor, tertiary.) As is orthodox Christian theology (Spirit-guided through troubled ancient waters in a leaky church-ship), the Bible is a product of revelation by tradition, which is the province of no particular church (the Catholic temptation) any more than the Bible itself is (the Protestant temptation).

Biblical authority today requires careful-prayerful-ecumenical definition, both positive (What is orthodoxy now?) & negative (What is heresy now?). The very project of this defining sails against the winds of modernity & postmodernity. (In my liberal denomination, the UCC, many think me bent on nothing but sniffing out deviations, heresies. I admit only that, being a contrarian, I have a gift for negativity.)

14 Back to the divine sanction. On the 2nd floor of historical theology, one of the accretions was the Greek notion of **perfection**. In faithfulness to the 1st floor (apologetics), & in battles with rival metaphysical systems (polemics), the doctrine of the Trinity was shaped up under divine guidance (note my use of the divine sanction for the orthodox understanding of the Trinity as secondary revelation).

But as a house's 2nd floor is not as stable-secure as its 1st floor, canonical-classic trinitarian doctrine has some cracks which could not have been seen by our Christian intellectual fore-fighters. Eg, those ancient worthies believed (with Plato) that the planets' orbits must be circular because the universe's structure is perfect & the circle is perfect. But as we now know, no planet's orbit is circular--from which we can conclude, variously, that (1) there's something wrong with the planets, (2) the ellipse is also perfect, or (3) there's something wrong with the Greek notion of perfection. On the third assumption, let's return to the 1st floor & ask whether the biblical God is perfect--on some such syllogism as this: (1) God is the highest; (2) the highest must be perfect; therefore, (3) God is perfect. But on the 1st floor, that logic won't wash: the Hebrew idea of perfection does not include the Greek esthetic-symmetrical-telic sememe--not was Jesus' life perfect in that Greek sense (eg, he lacked a wife & offspring, & failed to experience middle & old age).

2847.7 15 Why is what I'm saying here hard to grasp? Because our civilization is so pervaded by the Greek (for us, 2nd-floor) notion of perfection that returning to the 1st floor seems almost a betrayal of reality (though the grip of that Greek conceptuality began to loosen, in the physical sciences, early in the present century).

16 (The best way to get at that Greek perfection-idea is in works of philosophy [such as the article "Perfection" in vol.6 of THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY (Mac/67), which traces its influence on Christianity] & in works of art [such as Ken. Clark's magisterial THE NUDE: A STUDY IN IDEAL FORM (Doubleday/59), the index giving two references to divine perfection & 16 to physical perfection].)

(Some monographs well distinguish the two perfection-ideas. Outstanding is Martin Foss' THE IDEA OF PERFECTION IN THE WESTERN WORLD [U. of Nebr./67]: the Greek idea is static, abstract, limited, erroneous; the biblical idea is not stagnant but a living experience of faith in the personal God known in the course of dynamic service.)

17 As daily obligations shape life & provide meaning (& meaning is lost when--eg, upon moving into a nursing home--life becomes shapeless), metaphors shape thinking &, thereby, life. My beloved teacher Henry Nelson Wieman taught, even as early as his first book (1925), that God-as-personal is a metaphor whose time, in light of modern science, has passed: it is a metaphor that should be archived. (In my six courses with him, I strongly disagreed, & he respected my disagreement.) Now, feminist theology presses upon me the same argument against the biblical God's masculinity. (I strongly disagree, & am disrespected for contending that a genderless personal deity is a metaphorical oxymoron & anomaly.)

18 On the 2nd floor, a Greek metaphor entering into the Christian God-idea was the circle-**dance** (περιχωρήσις *perichoresis*--rotation [as of a wheel or planets], a going around [in a circle], a dancing around). In this dance (common throughout the world; among the Jews, the hora dance), (1) all participants are equal (no matter their relative social standing before & after the dance), & (2) fast rotation gives the impression that the dancers are merging into one another. Both ideas were used, in their shaping of the doctrine of God, as metaphorical-inferential extensions by Greek Christian theologians. Father/Son/Spirit in the divine circle-dance are co-equal & interpenetrating. (Philip Schaff, HISTORY OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH [Scrib/1889] III.680-1: "the metaphysical bent of the Greek mind" led Greek Christian thinkers, beginning on the 1st floor ["the trinity of revelation"--creation/redemption/preservation] to proceed, on the 2nd floor, to "reason back thence to a trinity of being....The Nicene divines...move somewhat too exclusively in the field of speculation and in the dark regions of the...relations of the Godhead, and too little upon the practical ground of the fact of salvation.") Read alone by itself, the NT sprouts seeds of heresy--such as modalism & subordinationism--in the doctrine of God. That 1st-floor fact (determinative for the Christian Connection founders of the community in which I live, Craigville) should give 2nd-floor warning against tight orthodox dogmatism. Even the American Presbyterians' premier orthodox theologian, Princeton's Hodge, after dealing with the awkwardness of the NT doctrine of God, in contrast to Nicean neatness, admits that "we cannot understand the Almighty unto perfection" (SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY [1871; Eerdmans reprint/40] I.462).

19 Now suppose, instead of taking the "perfect" circle-dance as model for trinitarian thinking, we use instead the modern dance, which has the courage of imperfection. In reading through my 3x5 file-section behind "PERFECT, PERFECT-ION," I came upon this statement of the doyenne of modern American dance, Martha Graham (52 NEW YORK TIMES 4.26.73): "It was not ugly to be ugly [in certain dance postures & actions]....everything that is made has the divine fallacy. Like the American Indian blanket where the squaw weaves in a conscious mistake, to let the soul out. Otherwise it is cold and statis. By divine fallacy, I mean that which is eternal, the continuation of the spirit." The arts can teach theologians to be, not less affirmative, but more modest, in their archetechtonics (or, to remain in the metaphor, choreography). This old biblical scholar advises them to spend more time on the 1st floor, where revelation is like modern dance, not the circle dance.

CAUTION to residents of the first floor: Despise not the continuing revelation

2847.8 of the floors above. That was the error of Craigville's founding communion & of all biblicists (bibliolaters). The Speaker didn't stop speaking when the Book (the canon) was closed, though the speaking is continuous with, not divergent from, the already spoken (Jn.16.14-15: "the Spirit...will take what is mine and declare it to you"). Nothing I say in this or any other Thinksheet should be taken to mean that I've moved out of the three-story house of revelation into a Cape (one-story) Cape Cod or bungalow. But I am an enemy of those who withdraw from their bank only new deposits (in contrast to old: Mt.13.52)--despising (as did Marcion) the OT on the ground that the N has come, or despising the Bible on the ground that its revelation has been superceded (by reason, or later-superior morals [eg, rejecting the Bible's way of seeing (& speaking of) God as "patriarchal," "hierarchical," "androcentric"], or reading Scripture only in light of later philosophical developments (eg, the ecumenical creeds or process theology).

20 Bible on 1st floor, ecumenical creeds (& other postcanonical early Christian literature) on the 2nd--what on the 3rd floor? Label it "modern & postmodern theology" & allow such additional furniture as philosophy of religion, mysticism, prayer, meditation, & (as stemming from and/or bearing on religion) economic theory, political theory, & the arts.

It's risky to characterize the floors briefly, but let's try. The **1st** floor brings meaning (revelation) out of nothing (*ex nihilo*: the Great Story, the Good News of the gospel, has reached us not by our striving but by God's speaking). The **2nd** floor brings order out of chaos without despising the 1st floor (the orderly Christian mind emerging out of the loose materials of the NT & the babble of cultic competition). The **3rd** floor reaches for contemporary relevance by inference, inferential logic.

21 Here we have a second-level of semantic spread. The first level is by **devotion**. Those who concluded that Jesus was God come among them, but who had not experienced him "in the flesh," inquired as to what manner of man he was in birth, life, & death. Think of these three as the sides of an expanding equilateral triangle: an elongation in one side is matched by elongations of the other sides: interdependent miraculousness. Rationalists from D.S. Strauss (1835) on (& including Jefferson) have subjected the Gospel to semantic shrinkage: virgin birth, miracles, & resurrection all collapse together into a small triangle-story about a good man of unknown birth who died an unjust death. Believing as I do the evidence for Jesus' bodily resurrection, I am predisposed to believe also the other unnatural (ie, miraculous) elements in the Jesus saga.

The 2nd level of semantic spread is by **inference**.^{*} While it functioned vigorously on the 2nd floor (in christological & trinitarian exfoliation), it's on the 3rd (& shakiest [least stable & revelational]) level that it has flourished & needs critical thinking. Two cases: (*A Latin wd., to which "analogy" is the Greek rough parallel.)

(1) In seminary 57 years ago, fellow-student Clyde Francisco, on our frequent walks together, pressed on me his societal inferences from the **sociality of the Trinity**: being a society, Father/Son/Spirit model for "mankind" (as the word then was) what human society should be. The general notion has become, especially among liberal theologians, a commonplace & a foundation on which further inferences can be built. Through all these years, the chief biblical warrant for the idea has been the mystical trinitarian interpersonalism in the Fourth Gospel--which reminds me of Charles Pegúy's remark that everything begins in mysticism & ends in politics.... Notice that here we are at a 2nd level of inference (3rd floor), where our structure is in danger of collapsing as a house of cards. My wariness increases when I'm told that the equality of the Persons (a 2nd-floor construct) sanctions equality in human society, not just (as in Gal.3.28) in church (ie, "in Christ Jesus").

(2) The Gal. passage does not say that slave & free (& male & female) are equal: it says that when wearing the same uniform (v.27), they cease to exist in their ununiformed differences. In feminist theology, the political idea of **equality** has sneaked into Gal.3.28 & dressed itself in the divine sanction, inferentially using God to "level the [woman/man] playing field" vis-a-vis rights/responsibilities (an adversarial image), to attack all "top-down" (hierarchical) authority, to promote feminist relationalism ("alongsidedness"), to neuter God & hiss at any use of the biblical (masculine) pronouns for God (God used to redesign God!). Some of this is just doing the right thing for the wrong reason; much of it is inferential politics in religion clothing.