



PRISM: Letter to the Editor, 4 Feb 92

Guilt and fear are enemies of honesty. Together they account for the failure of liberal Christians to deal honestly with shoa-holocaust and with a gospel-faithful relation of Christianity to Judaism and Christians with Jews. The UCC Theological Panel on Jewish-Christian Relations' "Message to the Churches" (PRISM 6.2) is, because of this guilt and fear, less than honest. I hasten to say that it is charitable, a Christian virtue. But charity without honesty is sentimentality, a vice Christians are prone to.

While my pro-Jewish record should protect me against the charge of antisemitism, I cannot trust it to do so when I try, as in this letter, to deal honestly with what the panel dealt with. As for guilt, I see more tragedy than blame in Jewish experience in nonJewish societies, and shoa-holocaust did not increase my sense of gentile or Christian guilt.

1 The Message evades the issue of whether the Good News of Jesus should be preached to "the whole world" (as the New Testament manifoldly teaches) or only to the nonJewish world. I am an antisupersessionist who believes the gospel should be preached to everybody, and the Message has nothing to say to such as I. Rather, it assumes that only supersessionists would favor evangelism among Jews (eg, Jews for Jesus & Messianic Jews).

2 My position has support in the New Testament. One of its authors is for Jewish evangelism (Romans 1.16 NRSV, "to the Jew first") and for God's "irrevocable" covenant with the Jews (11.29). How am I to account for the Message's fundamentalish proof-texting of the latter reference to the neglect of the former? Why has it no shame at such abuse of Scripture and honest scholarship?

3 The panel's myopic focus on and overreading of Romans 9-11 abuses Paul not only within this one letter but also elsewhere in his corpus. Galatians 3.21-29 teaches that faith in Christ transcends Torah, which "kept us all locked up as prisoners," but now "the time for faith is here, Torah is no longer in charge of us....So there is no difference between Jews and gentiles." But the Message affirms that there is indeed a difference between Jews and gentiles, a covenantal difference. Clearly, Paul would scowl at the Message.

4 At one of the hearings on the General Synod 16 resolution, I heard the New Testament, specifically the Letter to the Hebrews, attacked as unworthy of the gospel and therefore of a place in the canon. Hebrews is expressly supersessionist. A logical implicate of the Message is that the New Testament canon should be reduced by the criterion of antisupersessionism (the reverse of Marcion's criterion!). The New Testament is not as simple-minded as that. It wrestles with the mystery of Jewish-Christian relations instead of "solving the problem" by a fashionable, live-and-let-live, two-covenant doctrine. The Nazis had another simple-minded solution. A plague on both of them.

5 The principle of "reaching back before reaching out" is to be applauded if one does not reach back to distort so that one may reach out in the fashion one wants to. I accuse the Message of good-hearted dishonest revisionism.

6 The Message hypes shoa-holocaust as "the [sic] epochal event of the twentieth century." How can we know that when we're still in that century? What was new about that crime & tragedy was not that it was the first time a government tried to wipe out a people (it wasn't) but rather the awesome technological efficiency of the killing. In the Gulf War, we buried Iraqi soldiers alive by ploughing, something new in the history of warfare. Furthermore, the Nazis came nowhere near killing all Jews. We Christians should "re-examine" our "texts and tradition," as should the Jews theirs, but bowdlerizing the New Testament is a dismal and disgraceful way to go.

Honesty is an essential ingredient of love.