

WHAT IS THE CHURCH CONFIDENT?

2678 22 Apr 94
ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone 508.775.8008
Noncommercial reproduction permitted

Pre-readers of this Thinksheet were less than enthusiastic: its mood, said they, is not uplifting: it seems to promise, but not deliver, confidence in & hope for the Protestant mainline churches. My response has been, must be, that my spirit presently owns the Thinksheet's ambivalence about the prospects of the mainline churches....Leonard E. Keck (p.20, THE CHURCH CONFIDENT) says he substituted "confident" for "militant" because the former is "less abrasive," then remarks (fn.) the irony that the latter "has fallen into disfavor" despite the current militancy of many mainliners in the "struggle" for social justice!....I'm exploring the Thinksheet's theme from a number of angles:

Angle 1 What does "confident" mean?

The word has no moral or valuational content. It's a gerundive whose ethical bearing derives from its object. To the extent a person or church trusts, relies on, puts hope in who's or what's worthy of confidence, that person or church is good. And to the extent the person or object of confidence is bad, that person or church is bad. "Confident" is a **neutral** word, inviting exploration in both directions in every context.

Ergo, we should exercise the hermeneutics of suspicion when somebody uses the word "confident" on us, as Leander Keck does in his book titled THE CHURCH CONFIDENT. We should be alert to what Geo. Orwell wryly called verbal swindles, as in the case of a swindler's being called a "confidence man."

Angle 2 Is "the church confident" something that did / does / should exist?

Let's take these three verbs in order:

....Yes, the church confident **did** exist. The early church's central word for this attitude & atmosphere was παρρησία *parresia* "boldness-confidence" (on which Thinksheet #2674 works vis-a-vis "the mainline churches' loss of confidence").

In the 1920s I was in a confident modernist church whose pastor I remember as having preached a series on the Apostles' Creed, confidently denying each article as he went. In the early 1930s I was in a confident fundamentalist church whose pastor denied that modern(ist) biblical criticism had made even a scratch, to say nothing of a dent, on biblical inerrancy, the verbal infallibility of the Bible. Soon I found that fundamentalist church as intolerant, & intolerable, as I'd found that modernist church. You can understand why I'm somewhat leery of confident churches.

....Yes, "the church confident" is something that **does** exist & so can be studied as a positive/negative model of a confident church that should exist. The church confident today has the following characteristics. It's:

1 **triumphalist**, in a victorious army whose General Jesus has defeated sin & death, the devil & "the principalities & powers." In Platonic terms reflected in the NT, the victory is the reality (here-&-now in the heart & the church, tomorrow in history): present evidences to the contrary are mere appearance & shadows.

Let's look at this triumphalism from two biblical perspectives:

(1) *bodily posture: kneeling*. The God who "did not create it [the world] a chaos" (Is.45.18) demands that "To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear" (vs.23). Ro.14.10-11 uses Is.: "we will all stand before the judgment seat of God," who says "every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to [fn., "confess to"] God." The same NT writer extends the thought in Phil.2.10-11: Every knee bends "at the name of Jesus...in heaven and on earth and under the earth," and every tongues confesses "that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Just think of all those knees. Mandarin knees, Jewish knees, Buddhist knees, Maori knees....

(2) *theology*. Notice the triumphalistic monotheism. There might be many creators, or one creator + antireational forces; but there is only one Creator. There might be only one Creator, but many lords: the one Creator might not be interested in lording, governing. But there is only one Lord. And there might be many saviors, each saving the members of one cult, as indeed there were many salvific cults in the NT world; but there is only one Savior. Thus Christ's triumph is utter, complete, with no opponents escaping to

fight another day, another battle, another war.

Today's church confident strikes this triumphalist note every time the troops gather whether or not they always sing "Onward, Christian soldiers!" (Unconfident churches do not have that hymn in their hymnals--or if they do, don't sing it.) Keck (p.20) rejects the Latin adjective for soldier, substituting "the church confident" for the traditional phrase "the church militant," which he rejects as a too "abrasive image" for today. Yet--and here you can hear the mainline churches "talking to themselves" (p.108)--in a footnote (same p., 20), while rejecting "triumphalism," he says: "Ironically, the image of the 'church militant' has fallen into disfavor precisely at a time when Christians and churches understand themselves as engaged in 'struggle' for social justice, and do not hesitate to be quite 'militant' in doing so!"

2 **theocentric**, as a statistician could document by counting the percentage of sentences, of clergy & laity, beginning with the deity as subject. Today NEWSWEEK's Kenneth Woodward said to me, "Religion is a symbol system: change the language & you change the system." The patois of the secular world almost never begins a sentence with God, & the mainline churches' speech is so secularized that one seldom, even in church, hears a sentence beginning with a divine name. The religion has changed in that there's more confidence in secular than in sacred ways of speaking: there's no embarrassment about the former, varying degrees of embarrassment about the latter.

3 **canonical**. Confident churches today are familiar with, & romp all over, the biblical language-world of the 66 books (with virtually no use of the Apocrypha). You move into such a church & you learn to speak this to-the-world strange Biblespeak or you leave: it's the privileged language of this Zion. And its cultivation is primarily through the church's major stress on Bible-reading (personal & home) & Bible-study (in groups & in plenum).

4 **countercultural**. Inside the church ark the saints are heaven-bound: outside, the worldlings are hell-bent. The culture of faith by grace is very consciously set over against the secular culture of success by work, though some clever preachers (Peale, Schuller) manage to blend the two. Primary biblical loci here are (KJV, of course) "Come out from among them, and be ye separate" (2Cor.6.17) & "Be not conformed to this world" (Ro.12.2). This sense of being God's alternative community works well under persecution & when a minority (conditions in early Christian times) but is tough to maintain when the church wins (as in Constantinianism), shaping & dominating the general culture: the church/world difference blurs, then disappears. With that disappearance, the church is always the loser: its success = failure.

5 **veridical**, having a keen sense of possessing/being possessed by the revealed Truth. These churches are strong on the Fourth Gospel here: "I am the true and life-giving way," says Jesus (my translation of the Hebrew construct, 14.6), & "the truth [that] will make you free" (8.32) comes from continuing "in my word" (the previous v.).

Every successful movement has this foundationalist feeling. Lenin's slogan was "Marxism is almighty because it is true." "Deduska [Grandfather] Marx," said he, proved that Marxism is the universal explanation of nature, life, & society, & Marx-based politics is a form of pest-control, religion being the most pestiferous obstacle to utopia.

6 **communal**, emphasizing the family-feeling of the people of God. Again, the Fourth Gospel, where "love" is not general benevolence but a technical term for this family-feeling (as "truth" is a technical term for the in-group sense of the veridical).

7 **spiritistic**--a strong sense, & practice, of the presence of God in the Spirit. While this is true of the old holiness & new (since 1913) pentecostal churches, the emphasis is general among the churches confident.

(NOTE: The reason none of the above considers either Roman or Orthodox churches is that the Colloquy is on "mainline" Protestant churches. The non-Protestant churches have their own challenges to confidence, but the more fruitful comparison for the Colloquy is with the non-mainline Protestant churches.)

....Yes, "the church confident" is something that **should** exist--something the mainline churches should be but currently are not.

Angle 3 *Can the mainline churches regain confidence?*

If my answer were not **yes**, I wouldn't bother to write this paper. Some of my suggestions as to how these churches can come again to confidence are implicit, some even explicit, in my sketches of the characteristics of present-day confident churches (in Angle 2). Now let's look at some mainline-church characteristics that require appreciative criticism if we are to move out of the present **malaise** into congregational, denominational, & ecumenical mainline **health**. Why did I begin with the characteristics of confident, non-mainline churches? For the reason that Ab. Maslow gave when a little more than two generations ago he switched his studies from down-abnormal underachievers to up-abnormal overachievers: you just might learn more about health & healing by studying the healthy than by studying the ill.

The challengeable assumption here is that churches should be healthy, have confidence. While that's my general opinion, I allow for exceptions: some churches are incurably sick & should die, or at least are so sick that the resources for curing them would be excessively costly; & some churches are so wrongly confident that the Church in the world would be better off with them dead. But the exceptions are outside the scope of this paper.

A mainline church is:

1 **a thinking-man's** (oops! "person's") **church**. I recall Yoshio Fukuyama's excitement when, pursuant of his PhD (U. of Chicago, 1946, published only as articles), his statistical studies brought him to the conclusion that of the five reasons people join churches, for Congregational churches the top reason was cognitive, intellectual: people join Congregational churches to get sense-making help, to cosmize (get the Big Picture within which they can "understand" the little pictures & all the connections). Not too bad, I thought, till he told me the fifth, last reason, was devotional, to worship God! I suspect that what was true of the Congregational Christian churches was only slightly less true of the Evangelical and Reformed Church & of all the other mainline churches.

In his book, Keck rightly makes "Worship" the first chapter: people should go to church so Somebody can get something out of it, & they aren't the Somebody. The Somebody is God, & what he wants to get out of it is praise.

But when people go to church to get something out of it for their heads, their sense-making power, they move on out of the church when their heads do, that is, when the paradigms & plausibility structures outside the church become for them more satisfying than the church's Big Picture.

In our society, the church's main intellectual enemy is the public school, which teaches children to think, to make sense, not only non-theocentrically but godlessly, atheistically. I first became aware of this in biology class at age 12, when I painfully-deliberately chose Sunday school (the theistic paradigm) over weekday school (where I was being taught nonsense about "natural selection" & "spontaneous generation"). Since the 1925 Scope's "Monkey" trial, the mainline churches have foolishly, disastrously, left this battle to the fundamentalists, who have consistently made fools of themselves & of the Faith (currently, by pushing "creationism").

The mainline church will not regain confidence unless it successfully fights Darwin, Marx, & Freud, & the greatest of these is Darwin. The mainline churches have been soft on all three, but especially on Darwin. Mainline thinkers are here so much in denial that when I raise the subject, they look at me as though I were a fundamentalist! (The situation in Britain & Europe is more hopeful.)

The early Christians outthought their intellectual rivals, but many mainline-church theologians have made such massive concessions to the alien secular

culture as to add up to surrender, to betrayal of the Faith. Their native hue of Christian resolution has become sicklied o'er with the pale cast of secular concession. And the task of defending the Faith needs to be taken up by pastors & the laity.

This, Christian apologetics, is especially difficult in this time of the Church's low esteem in the public eye. Keck references Peter Berger here (footnote 2, p.26, Keck's words): "Since all views of reality attain their plausibility when the people who hold them are especially influential, the secular world view has come to prevail among the opinion-makers, the so-called new class--the scientists, academics, media folk, and others who manage the flow of information and ideas." I'm less hopeful of help here from theologians than from sociologists (e.g., Berger's *FACING UP TO MODERNITY*) & lawyers (e.g., Stephen Carter's *THE CULTURE OF DISBELIEF*) & humanities scholars outside of the religious field (e.g., Allan Bloom's *THE CLOSING OF THE AMERICAN MIND*).

2

a caring church. A church that doesn't care has more hope of surviving & thriving. Caring draws energy away from the healthful self-love a church needs if it's to love God/neighbor/enemy. Yes, I must spell out what I mean by bad caring:

(1) It's such caring for the individual as moves attention away from God & God's mission in Christ & centers attention on the person as needs-sump. Pastors' self-image as carers makes these sumps dangerous. The pastor who preceded me in a church was twice a week sucked down in the direction of hell by an old woman who, when I came & visited her only monthly, bruited it all over town that I was inferior to the former pastor. I went to her & said (exact words), "You are very old & soon dead & won't make much more difference to history, & I must give my energies to our youth, so you'll not see me more than once a month till you come to do your dying." The early American flag with snake said "Don't tread on me." Pastors need to fly a banner reading "Don't suck on me." Lay carers, too.

(2) It's such caring for the shape & reshaping of society as to redefine Christianity from a religion to a revolution, "liberation" absorbing "salvation" into itself. I am not, never have been, a quietist. I'm an evangelical radical, socially so radical that in 1968, UCC President Ben Herbstler got me fired from BHM on the ground that I was costing the UCC national office \$1 million less ann. income. But my social radicality grows out of my evangelical commitment. That commitment has become increasingly rare in UCC leadership, which is drawn now largely from justice-&-peace types who joined our church during & since the late 1960s. Being almost indistinguishable from the un-churched in "the struggle for justice and peace," these leaders have little churchly value, i.e. are undermotivated to evangelize into the church. Using largely secular sanctions, they alienate many already in our churches & thus contribute to further UCC erosion.

Our Colloquy's title is "The Essentials of the Church Confident." One essential is Christian conversion. It's subtitle is "A Theological Colloquy Affirming the Renewal and Hope of the Mainline Churches." As long as mainline churches are in the hands of society-oriented liberationists, I'll remain pessimistic about renewal & hope. Catchy, sound-bite, PR phrases like "a justice and peace church" & "an open and affirming church" deepen my gloom.

No, I'm not against liberation! At New York Theological Seminary 21 years ago I taught "Liberation Theology for Women" & "Racism, Sexism, Classism, & Etatism in the OT" (the latter including Orthodox, Conservative, & Reform rabbis), & 25 years ago "The Black Manifesto." And my 1966 National Council of Churches Triennium debate with Billy Graham complained that he'd reduced the gospel to Orphism (getting the soul to heaven), neglecting its this-worldly radical implications. But salvation, while including it, is as much more than liberation as it is more than Orphism.

3

a world-aware church. Prostituting religion to escapism (deliberate world-unawareness) is as blasphemous as prostituting it to obscurantism (deliberate avoidance of fact-&-truth questions): I'll have none of

either, & thank God for the stand of my church, the UCC, against both. A good half of my Thinksheets try to draw Christians' attention to the world at the sites where heaven/hell are at work. But we liberal Christians are in danger, as Tennyson warned us, of laying waste our powers from letting the world be "too much with us." From Frank Laubach, then from Karl Barth, I learned to pray the newspapers instead of only reading them: even while we are looking at the world, God can be more with us than the world is. (Throughout the 1960s I led UCC retreats for clergy all over the U.S., & frequently someone reminds me of my custom of putting the Bible at one end of the altar & a newspaper at the other.) To become captive to the woes & worries of the world is a shame to us & our Faith, but it's a glory to our Faith & a joy to us to lead those woes & worries as captives in Christ's triumphal march ("we take every thought captive to obey Christ," 2Cor.10.5). In interpreting the tragedies of the human heart & history, the church confident must not be the church arrogant; but neither can it be the church diffident. It must take the hermeneutical risk of pointing to where God & the devil ("the evil [one]," as at the pre-doxological end of the Lord's Prayer) are at work. The secular layer of our minds is tempted to be content with economic, psychic, social, or physical etiologies, but the deeper layers cannot be satisfied till we've honored our Christian Big Picture, the drama in which God is the primary actor. But the more liberal the Christian or church, the more loth to make that leap. In being less loth, the non-mainline churches appear to the public to have more confidence, to be more the church confident, & thus to be more persuasive to, & demanding of, commitment.

option for the poor" (read "powerless"). "Preferential option" is a fancy phrase for prejudice, & power-oriented scholars manage to read this prejudice into (& out of!) God. Keck (pp.62-63) puts it succinctly: "Alienation-driven theology" aims not at "developing the capacity for independent thinking grounded in a solid grasp of the tradition, but empowerment. When the goal is power, whether to hold it or to gain it, the quest for truth is an early casualty. The more theology becomes politicized, the less possible becomes a unprejudiced examination of the issues." The consequent "theological climate is a factor in the decline and shrinkage of the mainline churches." Priest/esses serving liberationist ideologies I've found so committed to action as to be resistant to the humble, self-distancing reflection essential for refinement/replacement of the action. By the law of intensified effect, repeated unexamined action deepens alienation in the troops & heightens we-aim-to-be-faithful-rather-than-successful pride in the actors, who then add new stupidities to old in a downward spiral of mainline decline. (Instance the Nov.'93 Minneapolis "Re-Imagining" conference.)

5 **a whimpering, fractious church,** whimpering about its lost preeminence in the culture & fractious in decline, as a political party out of power splits the blame for the ousting--one side saying to the other "You broke our solidarity by your unfaithfulness to our traditions" & the other replying "No, you broke our solidarity by your failure to be flexible enough to make the necessary accommodations to make our platform palatable & persuasive." This paper is on the first of the five Colloquy questions, namely, "What is the Church Confident?" The traditionalist/accommodationist faultline is visible in each of the other four questions: "What are the theological essentials of the Church Confident?" "What is faithful language for the praise of God?" "How can the mainline church repent without whimpering?" "How do we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" Honest & courageous addressing of these questions may help us to be less whimpering & less fractious.

6 **a non-otherworldly church.** By this I mean more than a thisworldly church. I mean that the mainline church neglects the eschatological (future-oriented) challenges & comforts so prominent in the NT & in today's confident churches. Amos Wilder's 1932 Yale PhD dissertation (later published as ESCHATOLOGY AND ETHICS IN THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS) rebuked modernism's easy severance of eschatology & ethics. Keck is right (p.117): "What many people miss in the mainline churches is a concern for the well-being of their

personal...relation to God, for the health of their souls." Health, good, but what about destiny? Here Keck is silent, letting the non-mainline churches & Shirley MacLaine speak to the public's after-death hungers, fears, hopes. No "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine, / Oh what a foretaste of glory divine!" Yes (p.56) gospel grace is a gift certificate rather than a striver's manual, but is the gift for this life only? (In his OTHERWORLDLINESS IN THE NT, Amos Wilder shows how powerful was the Christian afterlife hope in the early church's joy, confidence, & evangelistic fervor.) Underneath our society's superficial secular skin lie all the basic human hungers the NT addresses with a full range of motivations to piety & morality; & I think the mainline churches cannot find renewal & confidence unless their present religioethical sanctional range is widened: the present range is as narrow as was Harry Emerson Fosdick's.

7

a messianist church. Keck puts it well: "A messianist church either becomes more imperialist,...or ever more secular because the Utopia is achievable in a pluralist world only by declining to be explicitly Christian." Pat Robertson & Jerry Falwell yield to the former temptation: the more liberal a church, the greater the temptation to the latter. But Jesus, by revalorizing the messiah-idea, liberated "the churches from the theocratic end and its messianic means" & freed us for "a responsible participation in our pluralist society by being first of all accountable to the gospel," before & beyond prudence & "the passion to be 'with it.'" (Pp.83-84) Related is the next characteristic:

8

an inclusive church. Keck (p.79 fn.) quotes Leonard Sweet: "Pluralism [inclusiveness] became the fairy godmother of modernist Protestantism, non-inclusiveness its wicked stepfather." In the book, Keck himself is an example of this baleful phenomenon: he's so anxious to "include" women that nowhere does he refer to God by use of the Bible's personal pronominals, which are masculine: God is only "it" (pp.39,53,52 ["non-gender-specific language for God"]). But (p.50) he condemns the inclusivistic tendency to convert "God" into "love": Liechty "must mean that our self-constructed 'God' loves us. The poor thing could hardly do otherwise." "Liberalism has been so busy transforming the Christian tradition that it has forgotten to transmit it" (Leonard Sweet qtd. by Keck, p.97). "Unless the mainline recovers its confidence in the gospel enough to commend it heartily, the future of these churches will be bleak indeed" (p.116). And the gospel is exclusive, excluding all who reject it: should then the church also exclude them? Yes, if it's serious about the gospel. But of course the gospel includes "all sorts & conditions of men [sic]" who accept it, & so should the church.

9

a theological-mishmash church. Seeing itself as people-helper, the mainline church discovers that theology sometimes impedes its mission (construed as people-helping). The impediment is easily managed by side-lining, marginalizing, theology. "The mainliners' resolve to be open, inclusive, loving, affirming communities" combines with liberalism's "uncertainty about the substance of the Christian faith itself" to lead such churches "to prefer polite silence to controversy" (p.46); so theology is trivialized, & raising theological questions becomes more than awkward: it's an interference with the mission of the church! The Bible is raided, fundamentalist-proof-text-fashion, for texts usable for supporting the personal-&-societal people-helping causes (counseling, charity, various liberationisms). Further deepening the gloom is the fact (p.58) that "the antipathy toward the Christian tradition and its culture now comes from Christian theologians themselves." And (p.46) the people suffer theological anorexia.

10

a reactive church, letting the world set the agenda both for "narcissitic spirituality" & for "frenetic activity" (p.16)--"find[ing] in the world a way of reading the Christian tradition in the hope that faith of some sort is yet possible."....11: **a sentimental church,** without the balance of God's wrath (Ro.1.18, p.61)....12: **an egalitarian church,** without the balance of libertarianism (p.86 fn., pace Rein. Niebuhr).

My indictment of the church UN-confident is no act of arson: it's my spirit's only earthly home. Rather, it is a prayer, with you, that we shall have the courage & wisdom to spread our wings for a fresh wind from the Spirit of God.