

Preaching: TELLING HOW GOD THINKS

Blasphemy: TELLING GOD HOW TO THINK

PREACHING heralds (the NT Greek word's meaning) how God thinks (1) on the supporting evidence of what God's done & (2) to call on the hearers to think God's thoughts after him & to live trustingly in light of his deeds in Jesus Christ the Lord.

One form of BLASPHEMY reverses this process, telling God how to think--as though (audacious metaphor!) God had gone to a shrink for therapy or guidance: "For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor?" (Ro. 11.34 KJV; Is.40.13).

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This Thinksheet looks at Ro.9-11 as Paul's only extant concatenated thinking about why most Jews weren't welcoming the gospel as the fulfilment of their messianic hope & embodiment of their divinely assigned mission to non-Jews (to be "a light to the nations" [Is.42.6; 49.6]).

1 Ro.9-11 concludes Paul's only extant concatenated thinking & may have been inserted after 1-8, which exhibits almost as astonishing boldness of thought. Please note first what he puts last, viz. a humble assertion that his boldness is not to be read as an arrogant claiming to "know the mind of the Lord" (11.34a): no glory to Paul, but (the section's final words) "To God be the glory forever! Amen."

Barth takes Paul's theological humility as a model against systems (including Paulinisms) that overclaim knowledge of God, theologies in which "man has taken the divine into his possession...brought it under his management" (THE WORD OF GOD AND THE WORD OF MAN, 68), forgetting that "only God Himself can speak of God" (214).

2 The dominant **mood** of Paul as Christian thinker/preacher is joyful praise, so we're not surprised that Ro.9-11, his most adventuresome thinking, concludes with a doxology (11.32-36) beginning with an implicit confession of ignorance (TEV): "How great are God's riches! How deep are his wisdom and knowledge! Who can explain his decisions? Who can understand his ways?" This covers, honestly, for his 9-11 efforts to explain God's decisions & understand his ways vis-a-vis most Jews' rejection of Jesus (the gospel).

The dominant **doctrine** matching this mood? I agree with Jas.S.Stewart in his classic A MAN IN CHRIST: The Vital Elements of St.Paul's Religion (Harper&Brothers/n.d., p.vii): "union with Christ, rather than justification or election or eschatology, or indeed any of the other great apostolic themes"; this "is the real clue to an understanding of Paul's thought and experience," as becomes clear upon our "disentangling Paul's personal religion from the schemes and scholasticisms beneath which later generations have buried it."

3 "Reader-response criticism" factors into hermeneutics the reader-end, how the reader's mind affects how the text is seen/understood. Into this now I want to factor Cambridge U.'s Simon Baron-Cohen's thesis that "human brains lie on a spectrum between those that are better at understanding people [the feminine end] and those that are better at analyzing things [the masculine end]" (not his words, but those of NEWSWEEK's editor Mark Whitaker [9.8.03, p.6] in introducing the issue's feature article, "Girls, Boys and Autism" [for gender-balance, titled on the cover "Boys, Girls and Autism"]). Autism, it seems, is "an extreme form of male behavior" (4/5ths of the sufferers being male, & do better at analytic jobs that don't require much interpersonal relations). At the spectrum's opposite end are people-persons empathetic but not big on systematizing impersonal data/ideas (e.g., on the same page, Faith Fippinger, a retired Floridian who went to Iraq to be a human shield against the invaders (viz., we Yanks & Brits) without thinking whether she was helping Saddam or what would happen to her when she got back home: *without thinking* ("just like a woman," as male-chauvinist sexists used to say: the extremely feminine mind is as far as possible from the [extremely masculine] autistic mind).

Which type of mind did MLKingJr have? If you read only his PhD thesis, you'd conclude for masculine: rational, dry, analytic. But the maelstrom his pastoring hurl-

+ In contrast to "flesh Israel" (1Cor.10.18). Paul's INCLUSIVISM: To the Jerusalem church he said it's faith, not circumcision, that activates the promise: to the Roman church he said the promise was extended to the Gentiles without being withdrawn from the Jews.

ed him into brought out his empathetic-feminine side (superbly in play in "I have a dream"). His type of brain/mind? A wide mid-range from *good* analytic (despite extensive plagiarizing for that PhD dissertation [discovered too late to hold up the degree-granting]) to *excellent* empathetic (partly from his black-preaching heritage).

Paul? Like MLKingJr, he had **analytic** training (rabbinic, probably + U.Tarsus). We can see it more in Ro.1-8 than in 9-11, the latter in the grip of **empathy** for "my people, my own flesh and blood!" (9.3 TEV [though--vs.6-7--"not all the people of Israel are the people of God. Nor are all of Abraham's descendants the children of God....we are the people he called, not only from among the Jews but also from among the Gentiles"--vs.24--ratified by an Is. quote--vs.27: "only a few of them[i.e., Israel after the flesh] will be saved"; 10.1 TEV: "how I wish with all my heart that my own people might be saved!").

In King's PhD dissertation & Paul's Ro.1-8 we have tighter logic than in "I have a dream" & Ro.9-11. Both types of utterance tell it like it is, but the "it" of the first is not the same as the "it" of the second. The dissertation & Ro.1-8 are expositions of what is known by faith; the "dream" speech & Ro.9-11 are explosions of hope in the service of love. Most commentators make the category-error (as literary critics call it) of interpreting the second genre by the same (idea-producing) criteria as the first. *I know the hunger to quarry buildingblocks out of Paul (it was once an addiction of mine); but I know tears when I see them, & they serve another purpose.*

4 Weight: is Ro.1-8 weightier than 9-11? It depends on why you are weighing which. The former is weightier for understanding Paul's settled mind; the latter, his unsettled heart. His was "a religion hammered out in the turmoil of the mission-field" (Stewart.viii). Paulinisms reduce his complexity to system-simplicity--like that of Mani, whose Manicheanism briefly captured Augustine's brilliant mind until Christian conversion graced him with countervailing empathy & mystery (without which no humility, without which no tolerance for ambiguity, without which no freedom of conscience/speech/religion, without which no democracy). As Mani's system answered all questions on a Good/Evil matrix, modern reductionisms (whether or not on mathematical models, as in the current "Matrix" series of films) sacrifice the messy complexity of the human heart, the human past, & the human hope--amnesiac that the world is "no wider than the heart is wide" (Millay).

5 So many scholars (commentaries, theologies) I've checked on Ro.9-11 are at pains to insist that Paul is consistent, never contradicting himself. While that opinion is necessary if one is to run the Paul materials through a system machine, the materials themselves show him thinking/speaking/writing under no such stricture. E.g., Ro.9.6-7,24,27 (see in the first ¶, above): Most Jews won't be saved; but in that some will be, God's promise has not failed; besides, his call was/is not limited to Jews (vs.24: "we" Christians are of both Jewish & Gentile backgrounds--thus a third race, Israel after the spirit [cp. Gal.1.16, "the Israel of God" as the church: 3.7,29; 4.28-31]). BUT in Ro.11.26-29 he reverts to what Gamaliel taught him, on the basis of which he'd persecuted Jesus' followers (we have G.'s prayer cursing the Christians: p.4 of WJConybeare & JShawson, THE LIFE AND EPISTLES OF ST.PAUL [Hartford CN:SSScranton/06]).

6 By CONversion, Paul entered a new Israel he understood to be, as the heir of the old, "the true Israel of God" (p.224 of JBLightfoot's ST.PAUL'S EPISTLE TO THE GALATIANS [Mac/96], his tr. of 6.16).⁺ Though trained in the liberal Hillel school (by H.'s grandson Gamaliel, Ac.22.3; in 5.39, G. says that if the Jesus movement prospers, it's of God--but changed his mind when it prospered!), he switched to the conservative Shammai school (says NTWright)--thus his conversion by/to Jesus was intellectually as radical as could be within the intellectual range available to him.

Paul's REversion to the tribal-imperial view of *national* salvation (11.26, "All Israel will be saved.")--a psychological phenomenon I sometimes experience as a momentary seizure of pre-1937 fundamentalism--is not to be read as compromising his oft-stated doctrine of *personal* gospel-conversion offered to "the Jew first" (Ro.1.16) or (as antisupersessionists read it) as teaching that Jews qua Jews are on a special salvation-track permanently or temporarily parallel to that of Gentiles. "Through the unfolding of some new relation" (Trench, SYNONYMS, 150 [on Hebrew/Jew/Israelite]), old words --here, "Israel"--come to "express...this new" meaning: "Israel" now = the Church.*

* The Incarnation/Crucifixion/Resurrection radically revised/revisioned/detribalized "Messiah" (universalized as Lord of all) & "Israel" (inclusivized as transcending ethnicity & potentially leaving nobody out). Ro.9-11 lets us see/feel the pain of the transition & the mystery of the future.