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ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS
309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone 508.775.8008
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JUSTIFICATION & JUSTICE XXXII

JUSTICE WITHOUT JUSTIFICATION?

What I'm fronting off to in this Thinksheet is the ancient-modernist heresy that the biblical doctrine of justification is **unnecessary** & therefore **disposable**. By contrast, I remember hearing Wilhelm Pauck in his "Luther" course, in dramatizing Luther's conviction of the unity of Scripture: "The Creator is the Redeemer is the Creator." Anyone for whom it was/is not so could develop a concept of **justice** quite independent of the Bible's justification theme. If that weren't happening here & now, this Thinksheet would be only antiquarian. It isn't. A distressed Presbyterian layman recently sent me a letter he received from his denomination's national office, in response to his questioning that office's concept of "justice." The letter defines "social justice" in the contemporary humanistic manner, vaguely claims the definition is "based on biblical concepts," & adduces only one specific support, viz Jn. Rawls, a secular expert in jurisprudence. How does such a definition function in a national church office? Legalistically: a situation is ripe for "social action" if it fails the norms in the definition, which has divine-sanctional force (ie, it is the will of God that the church use its resources to protest & change the situation--which is the self-righteous simple-mindedness the layman was protesting against).

1. In the mail today was a sketch of a film-&-book on "Yeshua," for my critiquing. Here Jesus' God redeems not by going **through** justice by atonement-justification but rather by acting "**beyond** justice." Titled "Sacrifice and the Unthinkable God," the sketch finds the OT God "thinkable": "The god of the Hebrews was like a great human king whose demands were beyond keeping by any individual or tribe." He's "a projection" of human strengths & weaknesses (the latter, flying in rages, becoming vengeful, punishing offenders, showing partiality to sycophants). Like all other primitive gods, he can be appeased, bought off, by sacrifices, preferably bloody ones. He loves & prospers those who obey him, & is bad news to the disobedient. His holiness includes intolerance of the sinner: "The soul that sinneth, it shall die." As lawgiver, he defines right/wrong; as judge, he sentences the guilty, then offers mercy in the form of a system of sacrifices through which the penitent can confess guilt & avoid punishment. Some of the sacrifices are seen as substitutes, certain innocent animals suffering & dying in the place of certain guilty humans. (Note I can't resist: Have the animal-rights folks dragged this up yet?) In accepting the substitues, this god both retains holiness & justice, & shows mercy. In the ritual process he likes certain smells (of offerings, of incense) & sounds (esp. the singing of his praises (&, I add, sights). Is all this only for "the satisfaction and appeasement of deity," or "is there evidence of improvement in tribal and individual life?" (The text does not answer this question.)

Jesus, says our "Yeshua" text in effect, gets poured into this OT sacrificial mold. He's "the Perfect Lamb of God, sacrificed for the sins of the world." Paul tried to break loose "from the ancient legalism," & does so in 1Cor.13. Christian sacrificial rituals, the confessional & the eucharist, symbolically continue the old tradition, relieving feelings of guilt & perhaps sometimes "changing the pattern of life." The overall assumption is that "the god of the Old Testament and the god of the New Testament are the same": "a much better sacrifice, but the transaction remains the same. BUT IF JESUS REVEALS A DIFFERENT GOD, EVERYTHING CHANGES." We don't need God to explain Jesus' execution: "Jesus was rejected and crucified because he revealed a God very different from the God of Judaism." Then the text adduces these as OT anti-sacrificial passages: Is.1 (cf.61); Amos 5:10; Micah 6:2-8. Jesus's parables, "least changed" in gospel transmission, teach a salvation independent of sacrifice (eg, Mt.25: only compassion is needed; L.15: only the prodigal's "coming to himself" & repenting was needed; forgiveness for the harlot & the paralytic "was not contingent on sacritice"). To those steeped in sacrificial religion, this God of Jesus was "unthinkable." This God works by "UNCONDITIONAL, TRANSCENDENT LOVE...AND ITS CREATIVE POWER," "REDEMPTIVE" because "GOING BEYOND JUSTICE." (This assumes, wrongly, that Jesus recommended bypassing the sacrificial system, & that sacrifice had none other than a placative aim.)

2. Christianity's two lifelong temptations have been to tribalize-legalize (collapse back into Judaism, the gospel being the New Law & Jesus the New Moses [a temptation that overuses Mt. for its support]) & to mysticize (completely cut the cord from Judaism & see Jesus as bearer of saving "gnosis" [saving spiritual knowledge available only to converts, whose baptism makes them "gnostoi," wise ones "in the know"]). In the churches & parachurches today, the latter is by far the stronger, merging easily with various versions of New Age thinking. "Yeshua" is an instance. Justice, yes; but who needs justification? "The war god of ancient Israel" is bloody (in war) & requires blood (in sacrfice). "The message of Jesus is quite able to stand alone. It is, however, supported by the great prophets of Israel. The foundation of Christianity is the Word made flesh....Jesus the Christ. Any other foundation has supported untold suffering and tragedy in the name of god. The UNTHINKABLE GOD so loved the world that He gave us JESUS THE CHRIST." "It was clear that Jesus' message would be the end of Judaism," whose "narrow nationalism" "rejected" him.

3. What happens with this radical Judaism/Christianity split? (1) The mystery of the synagogue/church relationship (eg, Ro.9-11) is destroyed. (2) Judaism is demeaned as a dead religion (a danger in too literal a reading of the Epistle to the Hebrews). (3) Antijudaism (a.k.a. "antisemitism") is happier. (4) The biblical God is split into Monster/Wimp (cf. Elizabeth Janeway's classic description of the male sexist's double vision of woman as slut/goddess). Far from Jesus' God being defended by these historical & ontological discontinuities, God is diminished (as by all similiar concession that God is good but not omnipotent; eg, Harold Kushner's WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE). The truth is that it's philosophically & existentially futile to try to argue monotheism from the base of a diminished god (who is, by definition of the base, not "mono-," "only-"). The Bible, end to end, is wiser. It teaches faith in the context of **the mystery of good & evil**. (5) The "Yeshua" split betrays (a) Jesus, whose God was demonstrably profounder & more mysterious & decidedly not disconnected from the God of the patriarchs, Moses, & the prophets, & (b) the formative church, which richly read Jesus through his heritage, sacrifices & all--without which his would have been only the tragic death of a young preacher rather than the fountain event in the world's salvation. It is not too strong to put it this way: Judaism & Christianity live or die together, & the biblical understanding of **justice** lives or dies with the biblical understanding of **justification**. "Let the prophet wait for the vision though it tarry: the proud oppressor cannot last, but the righteous shall live by his constancy, or faithfulness" (Hab.2:4, Geo. Adam Smith in loco, AN EXPOSITION OF THE BIBLE, IV.588). The God we Christians are bidden to hold in "constancy," & so be justified by faith, is the same dependable God Habbakuk taught his oppressed-depressed people to "wait" patiently for (as did Jesus; cf. endurance as the central virtue in the Epistle to the Hebrews).

4. In the intro I called this multi-split an "ancient-modernist heresy." The retired clergyman who wrote "Yeshua" was & is of the Am. Prot. modernist (a.k.a. "liberal") persuasion, which without discomfort accomodates much from both secular humanism & New Age mysticism (the latter more or less continuous with the Eastern religions & ancient Near East & Mediterranean gnosticism). For light on "Yeshua," the justification/justice theme of the upcoming Craigville Colloquy, & the Am. spiritual situation today, let's have a look at **Marcion**, who ca.AD140 was expelled from the Christian community in Rome for preaching what "Yeshua" is now preaching (except that the latter is monotheistic: Marcion is a ditheist, believing in the reality of the OT inferior deity as just, severe, harsh Creator, who is unconnected with Jesus' Father, the higher God, the God of love known only through Jesus Christ). Forming the gospel/epistle pattern, he gave his churches the first NT (2/3rds of L. + 10 Epp. of Paul) + his ANTITHESES (contrasting OT/[his]NT, law/gospel, & esp. the two Gods). Christianity more displaces than fulfils Judaism (a point emphasized by Hitler's "German Christian" thinkers; but Marcion said the Jewish Scriptures are true but impotent, they cannot save: the OT God only judges, Jesus' Father redeems, saves us both from our sins & from the OT God: through the Father's love, **justice** is given, without the need of **justification** via the Creator)....Marcion's "Father" of love is close to the God many in our liberal churches believe in. And there's a strange affinity with Tiliich's "God beyond God."