

"ON THE SIDE OF" THE POOR:

A MEDITATION ON A PREPOSITION ----- Elliott #1818

NT theology rests heavily on prepositions, in which the Greek language is lush. This, augmented by the Hebrew religiomoral sensibility, makes Christianity vulnerable to magical-salvific slogans (e.g., Christ died "for" us) and magical-ministerial slogans (e.g., Jesus as [Bonhoeffer's] "the Man for others").... This thinksheet explores the salvific-ministerial slogan much used by us liberal Christians, "God is on the side of the poor."

1. Here's a schmier of possible meanings: (a) God is partisan, playing favorites to the advantage of the poor. (b) Negatively, God's partiality for the poor = God's enmity toward the nonpoor. (c) While it's obvious that history is on the side of the rich (existentially), we biblical people are called to believe that history's denouement will prove (eschatologically) that God has all along been invisibly on the side of the poor. (d) God and the poor are losing the battle against the nonpoor, and God calls us "to join Him there" with the nonpoor (a phrase oft-heard in the 1960s movements). (e) God is already though invisibly winning the battle for the poor against the nonpoor, and those are wise who don't wait any longer to choose to be on the winning side. (f) In siding with the nonpoor, we are saying yes to our Lord's call to discipleship ("pick up your cross and follow me"), and the only real response is the radical response: single commitment, abandoning all other commitments ("let the dead bury their dead"). (g) While God expects us to lead "normal" lives in nature and society, we are to tilt toward the underdog: we are to be fairness-prone in personal relations and political influence, against both instances and structures of inequity. (h) "On the side of" includes "with," so we should live with the poor, abandoning the perks and privileges of whatever participation we may have, by heritage and achievements, in "the principalities and powers" ("movers and shakers"). (i) Our Faith does not expect us to change society (which is what only God can do, with the inbreaking of the Kingdom), but we are to let the Spirit inwardly-outwardly change us as individual/social participants in society, so that we "participate in the sufferings of Christ" toward the Great Assize, "the Day of Judgment." (j) The Kingdom of God is the struggle for justice and peace, and we are "children of light" to the extent of our participation in this struggle. (k) The Kingdom of God is "within," so our Faith's primary concern is not with physical poverty or even the oft-correlate of physical/spiritual poverty; rather, it is with being "poor in spirit" understood as nonclaiming vis-a-vis God, an inner condition available to all regardless of outer circumstances of class, race, sex, age, nation and in spite of quality of genetic endowment.This variety confirms linguists' frequent observation that the preposition is the latest and vaguest part of speech! But here the characteristic of this part of speech comports well with the jungle-richness of biblical religion.

2. I'm tempted to run a commentary on the (above) options, and I guess I'll just yield to the temptation: (For the below, see the above, seriatim.)

(a) This, which thinks like nonsense, feels like sense. Carved in stone above the mantle of Fine Hall, Princeton U.'s Mathematical Inst., is this quote from Einstein: "God is subtle, but...not malicious." Subtly, God blesses the poor in bringing forth from them, more than from the nonpoor, humanizing insights, including the reversal principal ("first shall be last"; Magnificat; vicariousness of suffering). But the sardonic Jewish joke: "Lord, couldn't you choose somebody else for a change?" And Jesus' denial of divine partiality: sun & rain on just & unjust. In cool light, the partisan God (tilting toward poor or rich) is bad history and worse theology. But it's good rhetoric when used by prophets against irresponsible power, for God abhors insensitivity--a point Gottwald et al are pressing helpfully with their "social-critical" (augmenting and correcting historical-critical) hermeneutics.

(b) "God's enmity toward the nonpoor" is not so as you'd notice it, say several

This thinksheet is a commentary on the last paragraph of #1816.

OVER

Psalms ("Why do the righteous suffer, and the wicked flourish?"). The prepositions "for" and "on behalf of" are not necessarily conflictual; but "on the side of" is conflictual to the point of being military, and implies that God is as much soldier-against as is Krishna in the opening of the Gita. The notion that God is against my enemy (1) tempts me to false security, (2) inclines me to arrogance, (3) blinds me to nonenemy aspects of my enemy, and (4) deafens me to the dominical command "Love your enemies." With sad heart I have seen much of this blind-and-deaf arrogance, all of it passing for authentic piety. Ideas are double-edged: they can (sometime the same idea!) rub our noses in reality and cut us off from reality--the latter, (1) by ideological hindering of accurate situation-definition and appropriate theory-and-praxis-formation, or (2) by miring us in verbiage (as the present Canadian joke that Canadians, coming upon a crossroad with one way marked "Heaven" and the other "Discussion Group on Heaven," choose the latter).

(c) "How long, O Lord, how long?" One half of my soul is suspicious of the *deus ex machina*, the at-least-logically lame notion that the god is coming to pull my chestnuts out of the fire and to beat up on the bastards now beating up on me or (nobody at present beating up on me) other "innocents." The Jews are right: Jesus, as he's actually panned out, is so far from fulfilling "Messiah" expectations that it's a long stretch to give him this title and it's a long shot (rationally and historically) to imagine his ever becoming a close fit for the role. Besides, Christianity can do a worthy job of self-validation without eschatological special-pleading. I say, that's half my soul. The other half joyfully, eagerly, goes along with the orthodox *Maran, atha!* ("Lord Jesus, come!"). I'll go farther: I'd choose to be a Christian even though I were to doubt there's an afterlife advantage to it, + and - (I don't doubt that, but neither can I agree that we Christians would be "the most miserable" without it). The God who has come to me through Jesus in the Spirit through the Church is my central visible/invisible means of support (*pace* Fosdick, a trope on vagrancy law, that an atheist is a person with no invisible means of support).

(d) This subslogan is a virtual recruitment-poster for "social action" religion --parallel to Uncle Sam's "Join up!" posters. On the contrary, Jesus "joined" God wherever folks would listen, including the homes of the nonpoor; and to say he "joined" the poor is an illegitimate modernization. Besides, seeing how good a job God is doing of blessing the rich, whatever "joining" the poor may mean it can't mean forsaking or even neglecting the rich (unless in some Manichean or proleptic sense). Shalom includes material blessings, and the rich got 'em. (The mutual arrogance of Cervantes' *que son el tener y el no tener*, the haves and the have-nots.)

(e) Because it includes self-calculation, this wisdom strand in "on the side of" mentality is minor rhetorically but tends to be major psychologically in the sense that the negative corollary is folly, so the person of this mentality is tempted to the arrogance of thanking God that s/he's not a fool, "as others are."

(f) As an end-of-the-age fiery preacher, Jesus of course demanded that followers "forsake all and follow me." No doubt he still calls some to this radicality, to be lived out in some form. Mother Teresa goes farther than most, but does not live on the street with those she can't house: she draws the line there, as almost all Christians "reasonably" draw the line somewhere short of (how loosely Christians use the expression!) "total commitment." I have known not more than a half dozen "Christians" in the most radical sense (including Kagawa): all the rest of us are more or less hypocrites, with insufficient righteousness to turn up our noses against each other.

(g) Close to the position I usually take....(h) An IBMer just told me that he had a machine invented so he'd not have to fire a totally blind man who'll soon be totally deaf. Thank God that that exec did not forsake power to be "with" the poor--or that Helen-Keller-type poor man would be poorer indeed....(i) My position only when irritated by "Christian politics," which is seldom....(j) I honor, but reject, this actionism....(k) I hate this phony, Manichean inwardness!