

"CHRISTIANS FOR JUSTICE ACTION," A RESPONSE* ----- ELLIOTT #1931

17Feb85....Dear Bill (Webber), Here's my response you requested to (Jan/85) "Reflecting on Is.58 in the light of our committment to the UCC. By a working group of CJA."

1. How explain that whereas CJA's action is strident, the document is irenic to the point of having about the same number of teeth as a hen? I'm not wrong about the 2nd: the mood is meditative, constructive, gently persuasive. I may be wrong about the 1st: "strident" being a pejorative word, perhaps I should have said "argumentative"--but I'm not enough up on UCC politics to get an accurate fix on CJA's strategy and tactics. (I have heard, from an Exec.Comm. member, that CJA is not more helpful than BWF, "which isn't saying much." But with some justification one can pass off that remark as an irritated response of a pro-bureaucrat.) (Knowing me, you know I have no objection to appropriate stridency, though TR's "speak softly and carry a big stick" is more often appropriate. The document does speak softly, and--as do BWF documents--carries the biggest stick, viz., the divine sanction, the will & judgment of God...which leads to my next comment:)

2. The document is so well written, and so consonant with my life-long yearnings and doings toward justice and peace, that I'm loath to sharpen down on it, pick at it, give it my (your face-to-face words to me) "severest criticism." Please understand (1) that it's painful to me to accede to your request, (2) that I do so, conscious "in the bowels of Christ" (Cromwell) that I may be "wrong," (3) that all my criticizing boomerangs, mirrors, "reflects" on me, an old social gospeler with a social-change mind (wedded to an evangelical-devotional heart). Further, I stand under the judgment of God that I may (1) take cheap shots, (2) distort facts, (3) abuse folks, (4) push my current prejudices, (5) lay trips irrelevant to the heart-mind of you 7 who wrote the document, (5) do my thing without honest dealing with you text, and so (6) run a number on y'all, (6) present my case-cause so stridently as to make it more difficult than necessary to deal fully-honestly with. In short, I'm nervous & fearful about this thinksheet. But I know that in speaking so vulnerably, I am uncovering many of the reasons why communication (as Loree says) "is so improbable that it's a miracle when it happens."

3. As you know, Bill, the saying of mine I'm most apt to bore folks with is "What gets you attention gets you, and what holds your attention is your god"--bore, because I repeat it more often than any other....Your teacher Tillich spoke of LOVE, POWER, AND JUSTICE. Make power the center of your concentric circles and you produce bureaucracy (the collective form) or tyranny (the individual form). Put love in the center and you live romanticism, personalism, narcissism, privatism, familism, provincialism, chauvinism (political form). CJA puts justice at the center of attention and so is in danger of underappreciating (1) the values and relationships that have nothing directly to do with coercive justice, (2) the structures-in-place for enabling, in church and state, what approximations of shalom already exist and deserve celebrating and thanking God for, and (3, what your teacher Niebuhr grew in awareness of and ability to communicate) the tragic ambiguities, in motives and effects, of all efforts to improve our own and others' morals and the humaneness of society. (I blush to remind you of matters you know at least as well as I do, but my task in this thinksheet requires it....You recognize Niebuhr; of Tillich, here I've used only the fact that he invited us all to meditate on the convergence and divergence of the three factors.)....Rhetoric gets nowhere without a narrow-beam focus, but it tempts to blind arrogance because (1) it forgets that one thing has been chosen to focus on instead of another, (2) it convinces itself that its focus is divinely assigned (the divine sanction, alluded to above), and (3) its peripheral vision, the longer the rhetorical time, atrophies, endangering the loss of (a) the sense of proportion and (b) the sense of relation or context--and so becomes hermeneutically less rational and less related to reality (e.g., the speeches of Hitler and of the Rev. Jim Jones of People's Temple, Jonestown). (Interesting note on the early history of NYTS: The "laws" of relation and proportion were at the heart of inductive hermeneutics.)

4. CJA is heavily, almost exclusively, dependent on and promotive of just one

7. Frustration! I've hardly begun to touch your text! Another thinksheet?... Perplexed that "justice action" projects both unity (pp.9 & 10) and division (13): crosseyed eschatology?... Hopeful for 4-6Sept85 Craigville II Theol. Colloquy. Where, in all this, is the (disappearing) congregation?

strand of biblical material, viz., the prophetic. No one could fault your document's accurate fix on Is.58, but you are vulnerable to the charge of what might be called (by ugly displacement!) a fundamentalistic-literalistic reading of it and identifying Jesus and all good religion with it. For productive dialog, now, on gospel and world, nothing (I think) would be better than that persons of various perspectives in UCC sit down around Is.58 and "give it a good go" and "their best shot." I'd want to kick in many things---these among them: (1) How can we get from there (the prophets' times and mentality) to here (our complex and pluralistic poly-hermeneutic)? (2) In view of the fact that the prophets' utterances were only tangentially related to and effective on "history," how can we make relevant-to-the-here-and-now use of their texts? (3) How can we translate to here-and-now plausibility their 1:1, cause-effect sense of Providence (divine promise/threat, reward/punishment) as providing a quick read of situations (e.g., no rain = punishment + call to repentance)? (4) How can we relate the prophets to those who, coming after them, provide alternative sense-making paradigms (e.g., the moralists, who claims to see guidance-patterns in nature--as the Stoics and Taoists--and history--as the Marxists; and the empiricists--the three-way approach I explicate, and favor, in my #1910)? (5) How does Jesus (and the Early Church) follow, and how diverge from (Amos Wilder), the prophets? Jesus was a highly complex figure, and it's clearly wrong to reduce him down to a prophet (which, among other roles, he lived)... Personal note: My high-school graduation thesis ($\frac{1}{2}$ c. ago!) was "Jesus of Nazareth," which I recently re-read--and found that way back then I was as drawn to the wise one, the wisdom figure, as to the prophet--and to the mystic as much as to either of the other roles. Freedom in Christ, and the turbulent complexity of Christianity, both rest back on this rich, unique, fascinating, commanding complexity of Immanuel the carpenter-teacher. So-called "prophetic Christianity" is reductionistic of Jesus, capturing him in the interest of social change (as Cadbury, way back in 1937, demonstrated in THE PERIL OF MODERNIZING JESUS--at the same time the European "neo-orthodox," to a man Christian socialists in a chastened mood, were making the same point).

5. Of course I'm in danger, here, of depressing "the native hue of resolution" by "sickling (it) o'r with the pale cast of thought." That is the legitimate question *L'Allegro* forever properly puts to *Il Penseroso*. At heart I'm more the latter, but in my personal history I've more than a dollop of the former. And the danger increases as one ages: doesn't Gramps deserve a little peace and quiet? Yet I'm bold-ened to speak the complexity because (1) I'm less and less, with the effects of righteous actions, my own and others, in my lifetime, and (2) I'm more and more depressed at the simplistic, slick solutions activists are offering to sociopolitical problems at home and abroad in the name of "justice." (I tremble to spear sacred cows, but I must be concrete: I must give a few illustrations.) ITEM #1: Is the present peace movement (anti-nuke and all) good or bad news to international tranquility? Nobody knows, nobody can know, whether we should rattle our sword at all, less, as much as now, or more. ITEM #2: Is foreign divestiture good/bad news for S.Africa? ITEM #3: Would some other form of apartheid, or no a. at all, be better for S.A. whites/nonwhites? ITEM #4: Must those who are pro-"justice" jump on the bandwagon of group after group that feels, is stimulated to feel, insult (see #1928, "The Insult Factor")? ITEM #4: Is "compassion" to be defined as getting Washington to throw more money at "the poor"? ITEM #5: Is Reagan's "standing tall" more good or more bad news for Am. and the world? ITEM #6: Since both tyranny and "freedom" (*laissez faire*) produce misery, in the trade-off how much misery ("underclass") should be permitted so as not to cut back too far on "freedom" in the interest of "liberation"?

6. CJA overattends to "the principalities and powers" (government at all levels) and underattends to (1) the evils "the oppressed" create (e.g., fatherless children: 58% of blacks born in 1980 were bastards, 38% of hispanics, and only 19% of whites--and almost all bastards fall, almost certainly irretrievably, into the "underclass"), and (2) justice not vis-a-vis "the oppressed" but vis-a-vis the oppressed biosphere. On the latter, the logic of CJA is literal divestiture, i.e., standing naked (as S. Francis in front of his father)--but you are, confessedly, comfortable, as is the UCC bureaucracy).