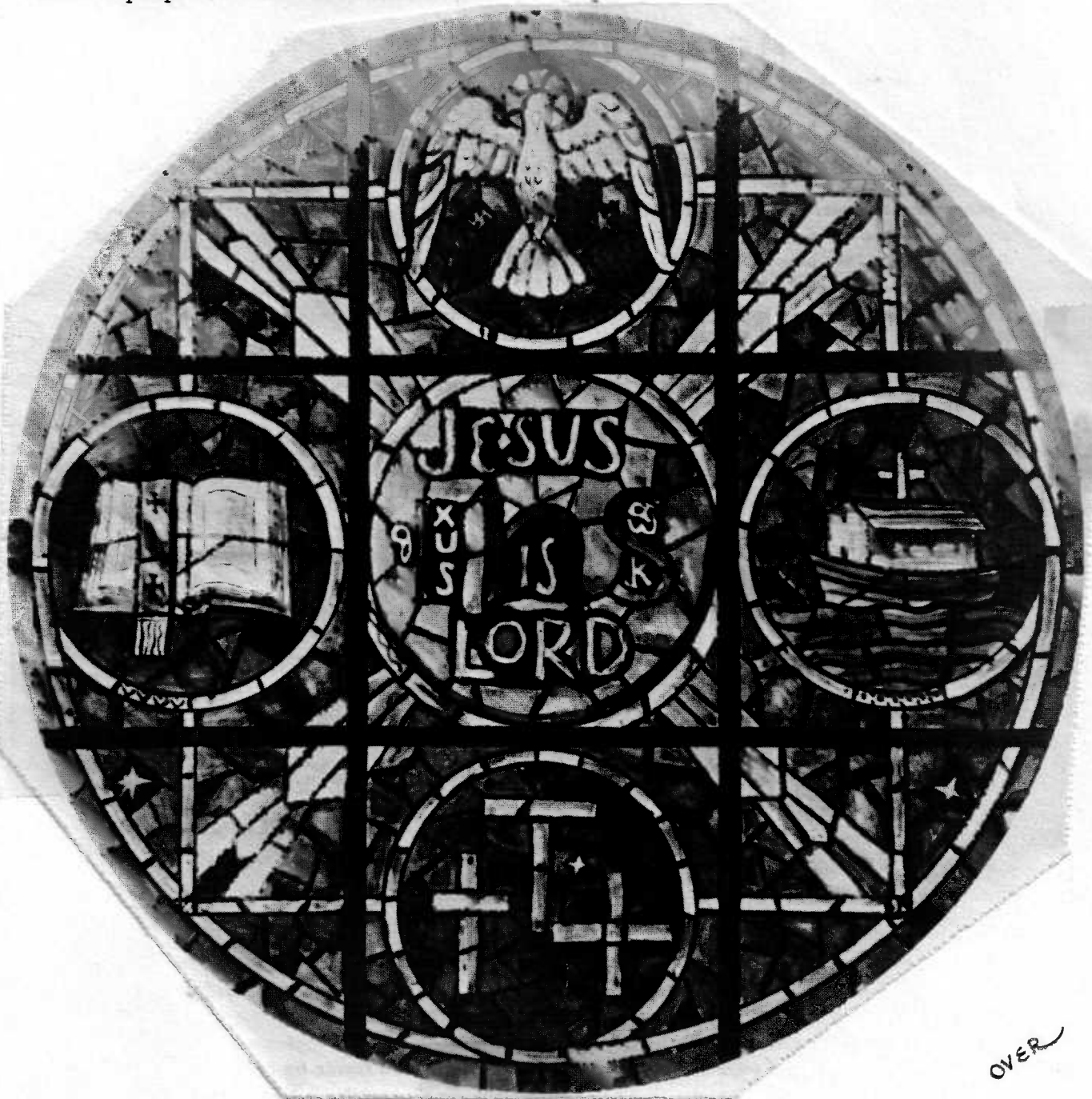


SCRIPTURE AS A DERIVATIVE AUTHORITY ----- ELLIOTT #1954

Thinksheet #1953 is a personal reflection on "Scripture as Authority" in itself: #1954 is Scripture as authority in relation primarily to "Jesus as Lord," secondarily to the three other derivative authorities for Christian faith/order/life/work.... I designed this "authority" window for the Morton (IL) Community Church new building during my 10½-year pastorate there, and wrote its interpretation for THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY, THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY,* and (as reproduced, *over*) YOUR GUIDE TO MORTON COMMUNITY CHURCH (1953). (*Jan/53 cover, the artist's cartoon.)

The Bible is in the *category* of the world's religions' sacred scriptures and in the *context* of Judaism and (with the addition of NT) Christianity. A parishioner of mine offered to be the donor if I'd redesign, putting the Bible in the middle; I refused this heretical-bibliolatrous suggestion, and the building had a ten-foot hole in it (boarded over) till she relented. The story is pertinent to the gathering (at Craigville, 4-6Sept85: "Colloquy II," on the authority of Scripture in the UCC) for which I prepared this thinksheet.



OVER

The Community Window

AS YOU stand in front of the Church (Position A), you can see in the ten-foot round window the message of our Church to the Christian world and the larger world: the lordship of Christ is central, and the circumference includes all who name Him Lord, of whatever tradition, race, or culture.

In bold English and heaven blue, the words of the earliest baptismal confession, basis of all creeds, stand out at night so clearly that even the glimpse of a passing motorist cannot fail to register them: "Jesus is Lord." This central medallion proclaims in its basic color, scarlet red, that the lordship is of sacrificial love. As he is our Hope, green is the color of his name in its most familiar (Greek) form: "Ihs," the first three letters of "Jesus". In the gold of the divine acrostic, the remaining Greek letters say: "Jesus Christ is Son of God, from start to finish Savior and Lord." The green "I" plus the four surrounding gold letters make up the word for fish, the earliest visual symbol of our Faith. The golden beams extending in all directions from the center indicate that He said, "I am the Light of the World." The centrality of this medallion says that Christ is both our chief Source of revelation and the ultimate Authority of all Christians.

The four symbols of the quatrefoil form a four-leaf clover of perfect balance, each leaf standing for one of the four historical authorities derivative from and therefore subordinate to our Lord: personal experience of God, the Scriptures, Christian tradition, and the living Church throughout all the world.

ABOVE the center medallion is the Dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit (as for example at Jesus' baptism). It is uppermost because from the time of His ascension our Lord continues to be known in the Spirit, who inwardly speaks to all who attend the still small Voice. The Christian God is apprehended first in the Christian's confrontation with the whole fact of Christ spiritually, inwardly. This is the tap-root of all other historical authority in the Church: God makes himself inwardly known and loved. This is the most durable source of human freedom, the impregnable fortress of the individual against the mass. This emphasis is one of the glories of Protestantism, especially of the Society of Friends (the Quakers).

From the Spirit-experience of the Risen Lord came Church, Scripture, and Tradition, the three other derivative sources of Christian knowledge and authority. All sectarianism may be considered, on one side, as originating in and defended by some distortion of one or more of these four, thus destroying the balance of freedom and order. Spiritistic-pneumatic sects from the days of Montanus in the early Church have insisted on the dominance of the Spirit-experience, and this insistence has reached its most creative form in the "Inner Light" doctrine of the Quakers. As for the supremacy of the living Church in Christian authority (represented to the RIGHT of the center of the window as an ark of salvation, from this use of Noah's ark in early Christian art), Rome is the chief distorter, with its unyielding assigning of the ark's rudder to one bishop, the Pope. (As drawn here, the ark is a deliberate off-motif of the symbol of the World Council of Churches.) On the other hand (on the LEFT of the window's center), much of Protestantism has unconsciously made the third source, the Bible, into a paper pope, asking it to bear a load it was never meant to carry — the dogma of infallibility. Finally, the Eastern or Orthodox Churches (Greek, Russian, etc., represented BELOW the window's center by three crosses) go overboard for the patristic Tradition (the Fathers of the first eight centuries) as their supreme historical authority, acting as though unaware that centuries ago Abeld in his "Sic et Non" proved the Fathers a broken reed, contradicting each other again and again. (The three crosses represent the three forms of Christian tradition: the one to the east, the Greek cross, stands for the Orthodox Tradition of the Eastern Churches, the one to the west, the Latin cross, bespeaks Western Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant; and the center or Tau cross, probably the original form of our Lord's cross, signifies the tradition of modern psychosociohistorical research in religion: the gigantic effort to recover as far as possible what actually happened, what really was said and done in history.)

The ecumenical (universal) spirit of our time prompts us to consider all sources whenever we face a problem of religious knowledge or authority. It is this ecumenical balance to which the Community Window — and our Church — witnesses. Healing can come to the broken Body of Christ, the divided Church, when the proponents of these diverse distortions humbly confess (1) that our Lord alone is the authority for his Church; (2) that it is blasphemous to exalt any one of these four sub-authorities to the position of ultimacy; and (3) that it is unnecessary, disruptive, and sinful to set one against another, as four cocks in a ring. Christian authority, and Church unity, need not be a four-horned dilemma: it can and must be "one Lord, one faith, one baptism," the riches of full Christianity replacing the eristic and tragic poverities of sectarianism. Centering down in this devotional simplicity and this loving inclusiveness, the Whole Church can work out its rational complexities in brotherly comity, attributing to each of the four sources its own just place, exaggerating none at the expense of the others, ever striving for "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

My photo of the window installed

