Beyond Liberation Preaching
(1 of 3)

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As I was preparing these lectures, I was of two minds as to what I should bring to you. One possibility was to try to clarify the nature of liberation theology and liberation preaching, and to try to give some indications as to how Scripture can be interpreted from such a perspective. In favor of this alternative was my repeated experience of the many misunderstandings and oversimplifications of what liberation theology is all about. When I face a new audience and take for granted that there is at least a basic understanding of the nature of liberation theology, I often find that my trust has been misplaced, and that much of what I say is misunderstood because it is heard on the basis of false assumptions. A second option was to move beyond these introductory matters and try to relate liberation theology and liberation preaching to other aspects of the life of the church. In favor of this other option was the fact that a few years ago my wife and I published a book under the title of *Liberation Preaching: The Pulpit and the Oppressed*, in which most of the introductory matters raised in the first option were discussed. Therefore, I have decided to follow this second option, and to try to move beyond what we said in that book.

However, in order to avoid confusion and misunderstanding, I would like to take a few minutes to clarify, in shorthand fashion, what I understand by liberation theology.

First of all, liberation theology is **not** about liberation –and most certainly it is **not** about

violence. It is about God. It is theology. It seeks to base its utterances on the Word of God. Secondly, liberation is **not** simply a theme added as an appendix to the traditional loci of theology. It is rather the perspective from which all the loci are read and reinterpreted. It is not that, after we have discussed the doctrines of the Trinity, ecclesiology and anthropology, we try to apply these doctrines to the issues of liberation. It is rather that as we look at each of these loci we look at it from a particular perspective.

Thirdly, liberation theology is always born out of the concrete struggle of a community that discovers, in the midst of that struggle, the liberating power and message of the Gospel. Out of that struggle come analyses, which ultimately relate all the struggles of liberation –of poor people everywhere, of ethnic minorities, of women, of age groups, etc. Liberation theology always begins with **this** liberation, with **this** oppression, with **this** struggle. Therefore, while male liberation theology cannot be primarily about injustice in Latin America or about apartheid in South Africa. It must be about whatever oppression and injustice exist and are practiced in the white community that are then reflected in the inhuman conditions in South Africa or on Indian reservations.

Fourthly, liberation theology is no closer to liberal theology than it is to conservative theology. On specific issues and struggles, there may be temporary alliances. But there is no continuum, conservative/liberal/liberation. Liberation theology sees much of traditional theology, both liberal and conservative, as oppressive and therefore, untrue to the Gospel. In this context one

of the main characteristics of liberation theology is what some have called “hermeneutical suspicion.” This means, among other things, that one must approach every traditional interpretation of text, and every traditional understanding of doctrine with suspicion that it probably serves hidden agendas.

In very concrete terms, as I begin this visit with you, I must confess that I come to you with my own sort of suspicion. It is a suspicion that translates into the question: Why have I been asked to speak to you on the subject of liberation preaching?

There are two main sources for that question in my mind. One is more personal. This is simply that I do not consider myself a homiletician. While in more recent times I have come across some very exciting homileticians, I cannot say the same for my earliest encounters with the discipline in seminary. Therefore, perhaps out of some lingering prejudices a, I have no wish to be considered a homiletician!

But there is a deeper reason why I must ask the question, and that is the fear that liberation theology may be taken as one more fad in North American theological and ecclesiastical circles. When that happens, liberation theology is something with which one should be acquainted, just as a few years ago one should be acquainted with a theology of play or a theology of the death of God. And the last thing that liberation theologians and the millions of Christians who are struggling for their own liberation under the power of the Gospel need is for their work, their

struggle and their faith to be trivialized into a fad by their North American brothers and sisters.

In order to avoid such trivialization, we must understand the manner in which liberation theologies have been born and be willing to undergo a similar process before we glibly declare ourselves ready to preach liberation theology.

Liberation theology was not born in the pulpit. Nor was it born in the library; or in the seminary; or in the preacher's study. While liberation theology has found support and expression in many pulpits, and in many libraries, and in many seminaries, and in many preachers' studies, it was literally born out of the struggle of a people. Or rather, each form of liberation theology was born out of the struggle of the people with whose liberation it deals. Black liberation theology, for instance, was not invented by Black theologians. Indeed, long before there was an explicit consciousness of such a theology, it was already finding expression in spirituals. Latin American liberation theology was not invented by those whose names have become common in ecclesiastical circles. On the contrary, that theology is an expression of the discoveries in the faith made by base communities scattered all over the continent, each engaged in its own particular struggle, but all aware that their struggle is somehow related to the Gospel and to all human struggle for justice and liberation. Once that was taking place, it was relatively easy for preachers to practice liberation preaching, and for theologians to write liberation theology.

What this means is that, if there is to be liberation preaching, that preaching must take place

within a context of liberation. This goes far beyond the notion that a liberation preacher must herself or himself be involved in a praxis of liberation. Indeed, there are times when such involvement on the part of the preacher is the means whereby a congregation escapes the need to face the question of its own praxis. The difficulty lies rather in the very nature of the act of preaching, which is not exclusively the work of the preacher. It is not sufficient for a preacher to prepare a sermon studiously, through careful scrutiny of Scripture and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is just as important for the community of faith to be prepared by its own life and work, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to acknowledge in the words of the preacher the Word of God to them. Preaching is not only speaking; it is also hearing. It is an act of the preacher and an act of the community. In order to be ready for such an act, both the preacher and the community must be prepared.

On the part of the community, such preparation means much more than the thirty or forty minutes of worship before the sermon. Such worship is important and must also be liberation worship. But even beyond that, the entire life of the community of faith must be so ordered and so experienced that the community recognizes the connection between its faith and life on the one hand and the message of the sermon on the other. This is not to say that the community should receive a mere reflection of itself, or that the preacher says what the congregation wishes to hear. On the contrary, the World of God must always come to a community of faith from outside, as both a word of grace and a word of judgment, and as something which is not exactly what we expected. What it does mean is that the community must be prepared to

understand the word of judgment as indeed a word from the god whom it seeks to serve in all its life, and not be able to dismiss it as the preacher's radical notions, juvenile exuberance, or senile musings.

This leads us to the conclusion that in order for there to be liberation preaching there must also be a community of liberation within which such preaching takes place. As in every case where liberation theology and liberation preaching have flourished, this must be a community that is experiencing and experimenting with the power of the Gospel to liberate it from its own oppression, and which then begins to relate its own liberation and its own oppression with the oppression and liberation of others. This is important for white male preachers to understand, for herein lies the difference between liberation preaching and liberal preaching. The situation in South Africa is horrible and must be undone. But simply to say this and to relate it to the Bible does not make one a liberation preacher. What is required is for that preacher and that congregation to see how their own acquiescence to an unjust order, and their unwillingness to pay the price for their own liberation, contribute to the oppression of Black South Africans. What is required is for the community of faith to engage in a praxis of liberation and an analysis of oppression, not only across the ocean or across the railroad tracks, but also and primarily at home. In short, what is needed is a church of liberation.

Therefore, before even speaking of liberation preaching, we must go back to the question of the nature of our ecclesiology. On the basis of what we have learned from liberation theologies, it

may be well to try to outline as briefly as possible how the functioning dominant ecclesiology relates to the economic structures of our society. I use the term “functioning ecclesiology” in distinction to our theoretical ecclesiologies, which often differ widely from the ecclesiology that functions when decisions have to be made about the life and structure of the church. Thus, I would like to take a few minutes to try to relate that functioning ecclesiology to the society in which we live, and in particular to the manner in which the economic structures and practices of our society affect our everyday living and our understanding of the institutions around us. Once we have done this brief analysis, we shall be able to begin to ask, “Is the resulting church one in which the insights of liberation theology can be experienced and preached?” And, if not, what can be done in order to make such experience and such listening possible?

Our society has frequently been characterized as a consumer society. Part of what is meant by this is that our society is one in which production and distribution, as well as the organization for production and distribution, are governed by the purchasing power of the consumer. We do not begin by trying to find out what are the most urgent needs of our society and then seeking to respond to them. Actually, we are suspicious of anyone who tries to define what the needs of our society are, quite apart from the wishes of the consumer.

This means, first of all, that our society is predicated, in theory at least, on giving consumers freedom to determine their own needs, largely according to their wishes, and to determine the best way to have them met. This is probably the most attractive feature in such a society. If we

are hungry, we can determine, not only what we want food, but also what kind of food we want, how much we are willing to pay for it, how long we will wait while it is being prepared, what atmosphere will be around us while we eat, etc. etc. If we have some free time and wish to be entertained, we can choose between a multiplicity of television channels and radio stations or hundreds of recorded movies at home, movies, theaters and concerts in the city, and tons of reading material, from the classics to pornography.

Secondly, the structure of a consumer society implies that needs are not determined first and foremost by the needy, but by those who have greater purchasing power, either because of their own personal wealth, or because they form part of a large group of people. I have just come across an ad offering people the opportunity to "immortalize your pet" by paying the trifling sum of $500 to an enterprise that plans to publish a *Who's Who of American Pets*. If there are enough people who wish so to immortalize their pets, the book will be published, no matter how important a priority it may be or not be to our society at large. Likewise, as the baby boomers grow older and begin to grow more concerned about their weight and their health, hamburger chains are discovering that vegetables and salads are indeed good for you!

Thirdly, since the economy of the consumer society is based on constant production for consumption by those who can afford it, one of the most efficient ways to stimulate that economy and to keep it going is by creating new needs. While Christmas shoppers worry about what to buy for a friend who has everything, it is precisely at that person that a great deal of our

advertising and market research is directed, hoping to create needs that were not there before the advertising occurred. An interesting exercise would be to spend an entire day watching television and keep a tally of how many things we're being told we need, probably because if no one told us we would not miss them.

I realize that by attempting to describe a society in such bold strokes the best one can achieve is a caricature. But a caricature may be a useful way to underscore a particular feature of reality. No one can really have a nose such as Nixon had in his caricatures, or a smile such as Carter's; but when we saw that nose, we recognized it as Nixon's; and that smile, as Carter's.

Also, let me hasten to add that I am not drawing this caricature in order to claim that ours is the worst possible form of society. If I say that in our society the power of the consumer determines production, and that this often means that the needs of the poor are ignored, I am not forgetting the example of places like Ethiopia, where the government determines the needs of the peasants, even though this may cause widespread destruction and famine. There are worse societies than the consumer society. But it is our lot and our calling to live in this society, and therefore it is important for us to understand how it functions and how it determines the way in which we understand even such basic matters as our own Christian faith.

If we return to the question of the functioning dominant ecclesiology in our churches, we will readily see how much it is shaped by the ethos of the consumer society. Furthermore, we shall

also realize that no matter what we were taught in seminary or what we have written regarding the difference between Reformed and a Lutheran ecclesiology, at bottom the functioning American ecclesiology is one, and is held and practiced by the majority of Christians, from Southern Baptist to Roman Catholics.

We are all aware that when people move into a new neighborhood, if they are church-going people, one of the first things they do is to go shopping for a church, basically in the same manner in which they go shopping for a school or for a pair of shoes. Most often a church is chosen, not because it is faithful to the Gospel or because it testifies to God's love and presence in a particular place, but rather because there are young people the same age as our children, because we like the preacher, or because we feel at home in it. Just as when we feel hungry we can decide whether we want chicken, pizza, hamburger or steak Wellington, and we can be assured that there is a restaurant or a fast-food place for every taste and budget, so when we go shopping for a church, we begin by determining what we would like to find in such a church, and then we go looking for the closest approximation to our ideal.

This is part of the background for that phenomenon that we have managed to export to the rest of the world and what we call "denominationalism." It is significant that when we speak of the various ecclesiastical bodies in the country, we hardly ever speak of "confessions" or of "traditions," but rather of "denominations." While "confession" has all the connotations of a stalwart faith and unshakable conviction, and the word "tradition" carries with it the sense of a

legacy to which one must be faithful, the term “denomination” implies that these are no more than various names by which we choose to call ourselves. There is certainly a positive side to this, in that we at least are willing to recognize each other as Christians. But there is also a negative side, in that we imply that the church is like a cafeteria in which each can choose what they please, and that the difference between various choices is no more significant than the choice between roast beef and liver and onions.

If we then try to relate all this to what I said earlier regarding the characteristics of the consumer society, it is clear that what we have here is an ecclesiology that reflects the first of those characteristics, namely that consumers have the freedom to determine their own needs, largely according to their wished, and to determine the best way to have them met.

Likewise, the other two characteristics of the consumer society can be seen in much of our functioning ecclesiology. As you will recall, the second characteristic that I listed was that in a consumer society priorities are determined, not by the need of the needy, but by the purchasing power of the consumer. In ecclesiological terms, this gives rise to what a friend of mine calls the “Kentucky Fried Chicken theology of mission.” When Kentucky Fried Chicken, or any other food chain, is considering where to open a new franchise, one of the first things they do is a market study. Since they are in the business of selling chicken, the basic question in that study is, not who needs chicken, but who is willing and able to pay for it. While the underlying assumption of the study is certainly a basic need —that everybody needs to eat– the

fundamental question has little to do with needs, and much to do with the wishes and purchasing power of the prospective customers, and with the presence of possible competitors.

Unfortunately, it is on a similar basis that much of our church development takes place. While we begin with an assumption that is essentially correct –namely, that everybody needs the message of the church– the fundamental questions that we ask have little to do with that need, and much to do with the purchasing power of the prospective consumers –excuse me, members. As we plan a new congregation, such questions take the form of:

What is the average age of the population? –The elderly certainly need the Gospel, but the church needs the vitality of youth, of people who are going somewhere.

Or, is the population growing? –Those who are staying behind in the depressed areas certainly need the Gospel, but the church must move with the times and look to the future.

Or, what is the average income in the area? –The poor certainly need the Gospel; but they will never be able to support a church and a pastor.

The net result of all this is that, while the churches have taken a strong stance against redlining on the part of banks and lending institutions, we too practice our own sort of redlining. Verbally, we deplore the absence of the church from the inner cities, but the manner in which we go about planning the life of the church virtually assures that we shall be absent from the inner city. Verbally, we deplore the lack of ethnic minorities and of the poor in our major denominations, but the way we go about determining the plans and policies of the church

leaves no place for the poor, and only a token place for minorities.

The similarities are obvious, when what should stand out is the contrast. Kentucky Fried Chicken is in the business of selling chickens and making a profit and makes no claim of trying to feed the needy who cannot afford chicken. The church should be in the business of preaching "good news to the poor," and a functioning ecclesiology that makes it impossible to do just that is both heresy and apostasy.

Then, a third characteristic of the consumer society is that its economy moves and thrives by creating new needs that consumers did not even know they had. We know the procedure. You wouldn't worry so much about perspiration if someone weren't telling you, over and over again, to "raise your hand if you're sure."

You know how the procedure works in much of what is commonly called "evangelism." As I listen to many evangelists, I become more and more convinced that their main task is not proclaiming the good news of the Gospel but making sure that people realize that they need the good news. It is much like a good news/bad news joke. You went about your merry way, without even realizing that you were lost. The task of the preacher is to make sure that you realize that you are lost, that you are going to hell, that God is going to punish you for not listening. Brother, sister, I have good news for you. You didn't know it, but unless you repent you are going to hell. Good news! "Raise your hand if you're sure." Just as commercials in television have to convince

you that you need a more potent mouthwash before they can give you the good news that they have exactly what you need, just so do many evangelists have to convince you that you need salvation, that you are a worm and a miserable sinner, before they can give you the good news of the Gospel. And I fear that, in more sophisticated ways, a similar approach also obtains in many of our “middle of the road” churches.

What all this means is that our functioning ecclesiology, as determined by the impact of the consumer society on the life of the church, suffers from individualism, subjectivism, classism, and parochialism. The point about individualism has been made so often that it is not necessary to belabor it here. It is clear that for most North American churchgoers the church is an aggregate of individuals. It is not so much the body of Christ, an organic reality in which we all share in a common life, as it is an undersea coral formation, an aggregate to which we belong for our individual convenience, and because it happens to be where we were born. No matter what we might say in our textbooks and our catechisms, our ecclesiology is decidedly nominalist.

Furthermore, this individualism is highly subjectivist. What lies behind our cafeteria-line understanding of denominationalism is the notion that all beliefs are of equal value, as long as you are sincere. Religion is generally good, and what religion you have is of little consequence, provided you really believe in it and practice it. Obviously, what this view forgets is that the early Christians died as martyrs of Roman religion, the Tomás de Torquemada was a very sincere

inquisitor, and that many of the defenders of apartheid are convinced that they are serving the will of God. Such forgetfulness has been rendered even more inexcusable after modern psychology has shown us how easily we can deceive ourselves into believing that which is also convenient –a "modern" discovery, by the way, of which Augustine, Luther and Calvin were well aware.

Thirdly, I said that our ecclesiology is not only individualistic and subjectivistic, but also classist. It has been said that the 11 o'clock hour Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in North American life. That is almost true, both in terms of race and in terms of class. (I say, "almost," because tomorrow I shall point out that there is another time that is even more segregated.) In our consumer-oriented churches, we are allowed to gather for worship with those whom we like –or at least with those whom we dislike within the context of a commonality of class and race. This makes it easier for the local congregation to meet the felt needs of its parishioners. It makes it much more difficult for it to understand and respond to the needs of the needy.

The result is the parochialism that I have already mentioned. Our consumer orientation tends to make our congregations parochial. If you are trying to sell pizza, you don't talk too much about famine in the Sudan –or if you talk about it, you make certain that your images are not too vivid. If you are trying to sell G.I. Joes, you try to make certain that the war movie that follows is not too realistic. Likewise, if you are trying to meet the felt needs of the local congregation, to make certain that the church's mortgage is paid, that there is enough for the pastor's salary and for

the rest of the local program that people will be back next Sunday, it is best not to allow the harsh world outside the class confines of the congregation to impinge too much on its life and worship. Therefore, just as the congregation is seen as an aggregate of individuals, so is the church seen as an aggregate of congregations. We may belong to connexional denominations, but in our functioning ecclesiology we are all Baptists.

How does all this relate to liberation preaching? If it is true that preaching is both the act of the preacher and the act of the congregation, it will be seen that the relationship is fundamental. In congregations such as I have just described, liberation preaching is impossible. This is true, no matter whether the congregation is liberal or conservative. In a conservative congregation, it is indeed possible for a preacher to speak the words of liberation –and then see how long he or she survives. In a liberal congregation, the preacher may even be paid to say these words, as long as the costly praxis of liberation is left to the preacher, and the congregation can go on feeling good about itself for being so open-minded. But it is very difficult for the consumer congregation, either liberal or conservative, to hear the word of liberation and acknowledge them as the Word of God whom it serves and worships in the rest of its life.

Fortunately, our congregations are not exactly as I have just described them. Fortunately, there is much of a caricature in what I have said. Fortunately, no matter how much our social and economic structure militates against it, the Word of God is still alive in our churches, challenging our smugness and calling us to new ventures of faith. Fortunately, there are still thousands of

knees that have not bowed before Baal.

The question then is, as pastors and preachers, as partners in discipleship with our congregations, how do we strengthen those elements in our congregational life that make it possible to overcome our individualism, our subjectivism, our classism, our parochialism? Since most of us here are pastors, Christian educators, directors of church music, and others generally responsible for the pastoral ministry and the worship of the church, I would like to address the question of how we can shape our pastoral counseling, our educational programs, and our life of worship in such a way as to overcome individualism, subjectivism, classism and parochialism. Or, put in the terms that liberation theology uses, “How do we develop a praxis of liberation in whose context true liberation preaching can take place?” This is the question I would like to explore with you in these three days.