

Beyond Liberation Preaching (3 of 3)

Dr. Justo L. González



Dubuque, Iowa

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info@aeth.org

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For the last two days, we have been dealing with the life of the church, on the assumption that liberation preaching can only take place properly where it is, to some degree at least, an expression of the total life of the community of faith. As I have already stated, this does not mean that in the sermon the community ought to hear exactly what it expects. What it means rather is that the entire life of the community must be such that it can recognize in the sermon the word of the same God whom it seeks to serve in all its other actions. Following that premise, and also applying some of the socio-economic analysis that liberation theology has taught us, on Monday I sought to clarify to what degree our own economic structures have affected the life of the church. I sought to do this, not by proceeding to a full economic analysis of our reality, but simply by relating the life of the church to some of the characteristics of a consumer-oriented society. Then, yesterday, I tried to illustrate what I meant by saying that the total life of the church must be informed by the same theological outlook and social analysis which we apply in the process of liberation preaching. I tried to illustrate this with references to three elements in the life of the church, namely, its counseling program, its stewardship program, and its educational program. Today, I would like for us to focus our attention on the act of worship itself, again in order to see how it can reflect the same outlook as our liberation preaching.

Worship is fundamental to the life of the people of God. Scripture as well as the entire history of Israel and of the Church make this clear. But Scripture and history also bear witness to the fact that the people of God often misunderstand the function of worship and assume that attendance at public worship somehow pleases God and meets the requirements of a religious life. It is for this reason that we must constantly return to the words of the prophets as they warn us against worship that is not connected with justice:

The prophet Jeremiah (7:4-7)

Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord." For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will let you dwell in this place.

And the prophet Amos (5:21-24)

I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.

These are just two utterances from dozens that could be adduced to make the same point.

And it would not be difficult to show that Jesus and the early church had a similar view of the dangers of worship without justice. This, however, does not mean that worship is unimportant, or that it somehow detracts from the life of justice. The acts of worship, which the prophets attack in these two passages and in many others, were commanded by God.

The burnt offerings and cereal offerings that Amos says God will not accept were the requirement and commandment of God.

The problem then is not with the manner of worship, as we have too often believed. As we all know, part of the sad history of Christian divisions has been closely connected with disputes over the manner of worship. Can we have candles? Can prayers be read? What vestments are appropriate? Should we sing any hymns but the Psalms? Should we use unleavened bread in communion? All of these issues have given rise to bitter disputes and even permanent divisions in the life of the church. Today, similar issues still seem to be the ones that some people consider most crucial: Should we use wine or grape juice? When we take communion, should we kneel at the railing or sit on our pews? Should we baptize by immersion or by sprinkling? And we all know of congregations where controversy has raged because somebody dared move a table or a baptismal font.

There are many injunctions in Scripture about the proper manner of worship, and they certainly are significant. But that is not what the concern of the prophets is all about. Their problem is not that the burnt offering has not been properly lit, or that the wrong cereal is being employed. Their problem is rather that the worship of the people of God, no matter how proper in its manner, is not connected with that justice that is a fundamental requirement of the proper service of God. In other words, no matter what the manner or

content of our worship, there cannot --absolutely cannot-- be proper worship if it is not accompanied by a life that seeks justice.

Sometimes we deceive ourselves into thinking that God wants to be flattered. God wants us to gather and offer praises, as if otherwise something would be lacking in God's glory. God desires us to sing hymns, because God needs our hymns to satisfy the divine ego. In this view, worship is an act of humoring a God who likes to feel important. Obviously, when put in such crass terms this view of worship is blasphemy and sheer baalism. But that is precisely what worship is when it does not lead to and flow from a desire to do the will of God. It is as if God could be bought off by nice words, imposing gestures and beautiful music.

On the other hand, a person or a congregation that truly seek to glorify God in all of their life will be drawn to worship God in order to confess their shortcomings and to seek assurance of forgiveness, to hear God's Word, to receive the sacraments that signify and seal the Good News, to praise the God who repeatedly calls us to lives of holiness and justice.

For those who seek justice, worship becomes authentic. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after justice, for they shall be filled." Only as we hunger for justice can we be filled by worship. We like to complain that worship leaves us empty. And that may be true. But perhaps, more often than we would like, the fault is in that we are not seeking to be filled

with the right sort of thing. What we seek in worship is a spiritual high that will give us energy for one more week of life and not to hear the Word of God calling us to a different sort of life.

God is holy. God's people are called to be holy. Worship is holy, not because of architecture or music, not because of religious-sounding voices or because of stained glass windows. Despite what I learned in seminary, worship is not holy because of the sermon. Worship is holy because in it a God who demands holiness meets a people and calls them to holiness.

Without such meeting and such calling, all our beautiful devices in worship lead not to holiness but to the same emptiness as in the words that the prophet decries: "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord." And, the more we shout them out, or the holier we try to make them sound, the emptier they shall be.

Therefore, today, as the proper context for liberation preaching, I would like to look with you at some of our acts of worship. And, since the center of Christian worship is in the sacraments --at least in theory-- I invite you to focus our attention on them.

Unfortunately, in the midst of all our discussions as to the presence of Christ in the eucharist and the manner in which baptism ought to be administered, we have forgotten much of the radical significance of the sacraments.

To begin with, the very fact that we have sacraments, that we believe that this material bread, and this material wine, and this material water, can convey the presence and the power of God, says a great deal about the nature of this God whom we worship. Ours is not "spiritual" worship in the sense that it leaves aside the material or the bodily. Ours is a worship that starts with the physical washing of the body and culminates in physical eating and drinking. Such is the nature of our God. I do not know about the old saying that "cleanliness is next to godliness." But I do know that for people to have to live in filth is ungodly. It is an act against the God who washes us in baptism. And I also know that the God whom we worship in eating and drinking is the God who created food and drink, the God who is concerned for the hungry and the thirsty, the God who demands that we care for the hungry and the thirsty.

Unfortunately, the traditional handling of the theological locus *de sacramentis in genere* has included a great deal about the number of sacraments, about matter and form, about the requirements for their validity, and little or nothing about the basic fact that is perhaps the most startling and, therefore, the most significant in a world filled with spiritualizing religion: Our God is a God who is pleased to be worshiped through the washing of baptism, and through the eating and drinking of Holy Communion. The very existence of sacraments ought to be a sign against any interpretation of Christianity in purely spiritual terms. On this point, as on so many others, we have a great deal to learn from John Calvin, who does devote a major section of his chapter on the sacraments in general to the question of why we have

sacraments in the first place and points out that we need sacraments because we are physical beings.

But we don't like that, and therefore through the centuries we have found all sorts of reasons to limit the material aspects of the sacraments to their minimal expression. Sometimes I fear that there are many that, if they could, would limit baptism to a drop of water sprinkled from a pure rose. And it takes a great deal of imagination and goodwill to remember that in communion we are partaking of a meal!

When it comes to the sacraments in particular, we see how closely they are connected to the entire prophetic tradition. Just as that tradition is based on the mighty acts of God, liberating the people from the bondage of Egypt and leading them through the desert to a land of promise, so is baptism grounded on the same divine acts. From a very early time, the biblical texts read at baptism had to do with the passing through the waters of the Red Sea, the drinking from the rock in the desert and the crossing of the river Jordan.

To be baptized is to be part of the people whom God has freed from the bondage of Egypt. And, again, just as the water of baptism is not purely spiritual, this liberation is not purely spiritual or internal. It is not only a matter of being freed from the inner power of sin. We are a free people. Any oppression put on us is an act against the will of God, against our

God-given nature. As Israel of old, we are a witnessing people, a people who are also a sign, and therefore any oppression that we practice is a denial of our very being.

There is a connection between being a people born from the waters of God's grace and being a people who can show grace to others. In Scripture, this takes the form of the repeated injunction that Israel shall love the stranger and the sojourner, for she herself was an alien and a sojourner. When we, as a baptized people, remember that we are pilgrims and sojourners by God's grace, we can claim nothing as our own. If nothing is our own, but God's, it follows that the ultimate claim on all things is, not that of the legal but temporary owner, but rather that of the God who wills justice and who shows special concern for the poor, for the widow, and for the alien.

To be baptized is to be living as pilgrims in the desert, fed by the bounty of God. It is to be citizens of the Promised Land, also given by the bounty of God. But Israel knew that the desert and the rich land of Canaan both belonged to God. The land did not belong to Israel, much less to any particular Israelite. The land was God's. Therefore, the Law states: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me" (Lev. 25:23). Israel, who had been a pilgrim in the desert, was still a pilgrim in Canaan. To be baptized means to be pilgrims both in the desert and in the fertile land. It means that we recognize that the land that we till, no matter whether we hold title to it or not, is not ours. It is God's. It belongs to the God who shows special interest in the poor, and the widow, and the

disinherited. Therefore, to be baptized means no longer to be able to claim the land, to claim the means of production, as our own. They are God's. And God is for the poor.

We simply do not take baptism radically enough. To begin with, we trivialize it by often making it little more than a parenthesis in the middle of our worship service. At some point in the bulletin the words appear: "The sacrament of baptism." This is the moment for which parents, grandparents, and other friends and relatives have been waiting. They come forward bearing a child in the prettiest finery. The baptism takes place. They march out, usually to a family celebration. And we return to the worship service where we left off.

Joined with that practice is the common understanding that baptism is something that happened to us long ago, and which has very little if any bearing for our present lives, even as Christians. When we say that baptism is the beginning of Christian discipleship, many of us understand this to mean that it is something for beginners --in our society, mostly for little children, and for some rare stray convert. But baptism is the beginning as a root is a beginning. Without the root, a plant cannot live. Likewise, baptism is the beginning of our Christian life, not only in the sense that it is that which took place first, but also in the sense that it is that which determines the character of the rest.

When thus seen, baptism is not a parenthesis or an act that takes place at some point in our worship service. On the contrary, all our worship, our getting up and rising, and our entire

lives, take place within the context of baptism. As Luther cried out when he was most sorely tempted, "I am baptized," my being baptized is an integral and fundamental part of who I am.

But we also don't take baptism seriously as a dying and rising. Since it is seldom that in the churches of the dominant culture, we have the opportunity to baptize people who have undergone radical conversions, we tend to think that the radical nature of baptism applies only to those cases and certainly not to the sweet baby we baptized last Sunday morning. Yet there is no sacrament of infant baptism as distinct from adult baptism. It is all one sacrament. It is all a dying and rising. It is all a second birth. It is all the beginning of a new reality. When those parents gave you a child to baptize last Sunday, they gave you a daughter or a son; when you gave the child back to them, you gave them back a sister or a brother. When the congregation saw that child coming forward, this was the Smith's boy, or the Brown's girl. Through baptism, they became members of this other family, this extended family, which is the household of God.

In this country, during slaveholding time, there were some who held that slaves should not be baptized. Obviously, there are many things wrong with a slaveholding society. But those people did have one thing right: If you are going to have slaves, you better not baptize them, or you will be enslaving a brother or a sister. This is something many in our modern society do not understand, and therefore they are willing and eager to send missionaries all over the world, preaching to people and baptizing them, but doing nothing to end the oppression

under which they live and from which we benefit. If it is true that baptized slaves become brothers and sisters, it is also true that baptized workers in an assembly line in Korea become sisters and brothers, and therefore the moment we baptize them we are doubly required to attack and replace the economic and political structures that oppress them.

What does this have to do with preaching? In the first place, it means that we must be clear as to who our audience is. When we preach in the church, as part of the regular worship of the community, we are preaching to baptized Christians. We are preaching to those who have been brought through the waters. Baptism, then, is both our point of departure and our constant point of reference. The reason why preach against injustice is not some general feeling that injustice is wrong --although such a feeling may be true and important. The reason is rather that oppression and injustice run counter to our very nature as a baptized people, as a people brought through the waters of the Red Sea to a new life of freedom, as a people born through the waters of baptism to a new reality.

From this perspective, every worship service, and indeed every sermon, is a call to the renewal of our baptismal vows. And it is a reiteration of the promises of God to which we have become heirs through baptism. Our baptism is the hermeneutical key through which we interpret, not only Scripture but also the reality in which we live. Liberation theology is often characterized as making use of Marxian analysis. It is true that many liberation theologies

make use of such an analysis and find it useful. But the radical nature of liberation theology is not derived from such an analysis. It is derived rather from the hermeneutics of baptism.

Communion is no less radical than baptism, although too often we miss the radical overtones of its significance. To begin with, we set aside its eschatological nature. The most ancient eucharistic prayer that has been preserved celebrates the Kingdom of God, of which the bread which we now break and the wine which we drink, are signs. In the early church, communion was not an occasion to mourn our personal sins as Christians pondered the death of Christ. It was rather a celebration of the resurrection and of the future to which that resurrection promised and ushered in. On every other day, for instance, Christians could bow or kneel in prayer. But on Sunday, the day of the resurrection, the day of communion, one prayed standing, unbowed, looking God in the face. The victory of Christ which we celebrate in communion has not simply wiped away our sin. It has also made us co-heirs of the Ruler of all creation. It has made us, in a phrase that appears in several early Christian writings, "priests and kings." To abase ourselves, to abase anyone for whom this victory has been achieved, to acquiesce to any form of oppression, is to deny this central fact of the Gospel. This is part of the central meaning of communion. In this context, we are reminded of Calvin's words to the effect that Christ is present in communion, not so much because he comes to the table or to the congregation, but because the congregation is taken up into the Kingdom. In communion, we are taken to the very right hand of God.

Again, this may not seem all that radical to us. But it is very radical for the vast majority of Christians, who live daily lives of oppression and who are told in thousands of different ways that they are not worth as much as others are. As I look at the communities struggling for their liberation in Latin America, I am certain that the ferment that is there cannot be undone. This certainty, however, I do not base on their organization or on their leadership but rather on the manner in which they have made communion central to their struggle. To attend a mass at a Base Christian Community is to become part of a living statement that the present injustice is an offense against the will of God.

Or let us look at the early church and its communion practices. From all the indications we have, it appears that communion used to take place within the setting of an entire meal, in which special prayers were said over the bread and the wine. For this meal, people brought from their own food, and offered it, as Ignatius would say, as a "sacrifice." Of this common food they all ate. In other words, the modern practice that communion most resembled was probably a potluck supper, but with one difference --and a very significant difference at that. In this particular potluck supper, there were people of many different social classes. Mostly, there were people who were sufficiently poor to realize the value and significance of food, for they were not strangers to hunger. On this particular day, all were fed with whatever was available.

This day, you see, was a foretaste of the Kingdom, where none shall hunger, and none shall make them afraid, but they shall sit, each under their vine and each under their fig tree.

Communion had an eschatological significance. But this was not the escapist eschatology of "pie in the sky, by and by." This was the eschatology that says, yes, that there shall be pie in the sky, and that therefore all who claim to be citizens of that heavenly kingdom better be doing something about making certain that there is pie for others here and now.

This is why Jesus said: "If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" (Mt. 5:23-24). We usually interpret this to mean that we should not come to worship, and particularly to communion, with hate in our hearts. For that reason, when I was growing up, I was told that, particularly before communion, I should make sure that I held no grudges against anyone. But this misses the point. The text does not say, "If you have something against your brother or your sister." It says, "if your brother or sister has something against you." That makes matters much more difficult. It is not something that I can patch up in my heart two minutes before communion, in order to revive it again two minutes after the service. If my brother or my sister has something against me, in order to be reconciled, I have to make amends; I have to practice justice. What Jesus, in fact, is saying is that before we offer our worship to God, and because of who this God is to whom we offer worship, we must practice justice in our daily relations. This is not so different nor any less radical than what Arnos said. To partake

properly of the sacrament that is a foretaste of the Kingdom we must order our lives as citizens of that Kingdom. The sacraments are prophetic signs. They are signs of the same divine justice that the prophets proclaimed and demanded of God's people.

In conclusion, worship, and particularly the sacraments, are a foretaste of the coming Kingdom. It is not that we are about to bring in the Kingdom, as if it were up to us to determine the times and the seasons. It is rather that the Kingdom, in a mysterious yet real way, comes to us. It is by virtue of that foretaste that we are given the courage and the power to continue living in the present age as citizens of the age to come. Thanks to the sacraments we can be; we are a prophetic people, a people announcing and marching on to meet God's future.

If we really believe this, we shall start living now as those who look for the coming of God's kingdom. If I told you that I expected to move to Japan in the near future, for I valued Japanese art and culture above all else, and because I was convinced that there is no better country to live in than Japan, and that while I am waiting for the time to go to Japan I am studying Italian, you would probably laugh in my face. At the very least, you would not be very convinced as to the firmness of my expectation. If I really believe that my future is in Japan, I better start learning Japanese. Otherwise, when the time comes, I shall not be very comfortable in Japan. And, before the time comes, I shall have a very hard time convincing you that Japan is really all that beautiful. Likewise, if we really believe in the coming Kingdom

of God, we better start getting ready for it. We better start learning and practicing "Kingdomese." Otherwise, when the time comes, we shall be quite uncomfortable! And in the meanwhile, our testimony will hardly be credible.

Just as baptism must be the hermeneutical principle in liberation preaching, just so must communion be its principle of application. When we see the radical significance of communion, we discover a parallelism between what the reformers said about the connection of word and sacrament and what liberation theologians are now saying about the connection of theory and praxis. A sermon, no matter how radical, is mere words. Words without action are powerless. They are, as some medieval thinkers would say, *flatus vocis*. And such *flatus vocis* cannot be the Word of God, which never returns to God empty. The sacrament is necessary, not to complement the words, but to bring them to praxis. The table is the place at which Christians train for the praxis of liberation in daily life. It is at the table that we meet others, near and far, whose struggles must then become our struggle. It is at the table that we begin to experience a foretaste of the coming Kingdom whose citizens we are, far above any pride or prejudice of nation or birth. It is at the table that we enact that sharing of God's resources that is at the core of the Christian life. It is at the table that we are all equal before God. In a way, it is the sacrament, the praxis of the words from the pulpit, that makes the words of the preacher be Word of God.

Without such a vision of the life of the church, and in particular of its life of worship, liberation preaching is impossible. With it, it is inevitable.

