Liberation Theology and the Task of Ministry: Preaching (1 of 2)

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Catherine: Traditionally the work of the ministry has been divided into priestly, prophetic, and pastoral tasks. These divisions have some merit, though they often require something of a "forcing" of many elements of a job description into one of these areas.

But when these terms are used, even in a rough way, a ministry concerned with issues of justice seems to fit mostly the "prophetic" category. Preaching probably becomes central, with perhaps the use of a liberation hermeneutic--or a stress on topical preaching dealing with contemporary social issues.

The other traditional means of expression of a "prophetic" ministry has been the involvement of the minister in justice issues in the wider community.

Our thesis in these two lectures is that it is possible--perhaps even necessary--to relate liberation theology to the priestly and pastoral tasks, as well as to those that have traditionally been placed under the heading of the prophetic.

In a rough way, and without seeking absolutely firm definitions, let us classify as priestly the functions having to do with the leadership of worship, other than the sermon, and culminating in the sacraments. The pastoral tasks will then be those having to do with ministry to

individuals, especially those in crisis, and with the ongoing life of the congregation, as in evangelism, education, and stewardship.

Justo: Liberation theology is not a theology *about* liberation, but rather a theology which looks at every issue from a particular perspective. It sees socio-political significance, not only in what has traditionally been called "social ethics," but also in the doctrine of the Trinity, in soteriology, eschatology, etc. Therefore, to apply such a methodology to the question of the task of the minister may help us avoid some of the pitfalls of a socially active ministry as we have known it in the last decades.

The first such pitfall is what could be called the minister as a sociopolitical vicar for the congregation. During the Civil Rights movement and during the Vietnam War there were many ministers in the vanguard of sociopolitical action. Their courage ought not to be denied. But too often their congregations discharged their responsibility through them, and thus avoided real commitment. A liberal congregation was one that "let" its minister do this sort of thing.

The second possible pitfall: "prophetic preaching." The minister points out to the congregation its shortcomings on issues of justice and is thus labeled a "prophet." There is indeed a need to point out such shortcomings. But there are three fundamental problems with this kind of preaching:

1) Congregations often perceive this kind of preaching as a venting of the preacher's hostilities, not clearly related to the central meanings of the Gospel. In such cases the preaching itself loses authority.

2) It often makes the preacher master of Scripture. A "prophetic" text must be chosen. When the preacher reads from Amos or James, everybody knows what is to follow. Again, this weakens the authority of the message, for the congregation can easily escape by deciding that the preacher always chooses convenient texts. (At this point, liberation theology, with its emphasis on the liberation significance of the entire biblical tradition, has the advantage of being able to preach on any part of Scripture, and thus in fact telling the congregation: "if you don't like it, fight the Bible, not me.")

3) So-called prophetic preaching usually takes for granted that the preacher is the prophet and the congregation the unfaithful people. But there are other options. How about the entire congregation being the prophetic people? How about someone or something from outside being the prophet to the congregation and to the preacher? (It is possible to see this in some of the parables of Jesus.)

Catherine: Today we will deal briefly --and in survey fashion-- with the relationship of issues of justice to the pastoral tasks of the parish ministry. This is merely opening up the questions. The assumption is that this same pastor will be involved as well in prophetic and priestly tasks. But in any case, the question that we shall be addressing today is how the roles that have usually

been called "pastoral" can also be "prophetic"--that is, involve both the congregation and the minister in issues of justice and liberation.

Justo: When, in the common use of language, the distinction is made between prophetic and the pastoral, the assumption is that the first bangs people on the head while the latter pats them on the back. To be a prophet is to be a valiant crusader, a thorn in the flesh of injustice, or, in less kindly terms, a Don Quixote charging at windmills and a pigheaded insensitive rabble-rouser. On the other hand, in contrast to this, to be a pastor is to be sensitive, understanding people's deeply felt but unexpressed needs, gentle, tractable and, in less kindly terms, a spineless, nice, agreeable weathervane.

But such stereotypes actually ignore the true meaning of the term "pastoral." To be a pastor is, literally, to be a shepherd. And a true shepherd not usually led by the flock. A good shepherd does indeed have the confidence of the flock, which trusts that the shepherd knows where the good pastures and the dangers are. And the flock follows willingly. But the shepherd carries a stout stick, not only to fight off wolves and marauders, but also to keep the flock in line. The shepherd knows where the flock ought to be going, and the sheep that tend to go astray will feel the prodding of the shepherd's staff.

We Protestants have difficulties with this, mostly because we do not know how to deal with authority.

And, as pastors, very often our problem is not so much that we cannot deal with authorities above us, as that we do not know how to claim, we do not dare to claim, our own authority. That is why few of us would feel comfortable being called prophets. The prophet is too sure, too authoritative. That is also why we are more comfortable being called "pastors" than "shepherds," although in truth the two words mean the same thing. But, again, the term "shepherd" brings to mind an authority that we dare not claim. Yet, to be a "pastor" in the biblical sense means to be a shepherd. And this means:

1) that somehow the shepherd has a vision of where the flock ought to be headed. To be a Christian pastor means to have an eschatological vision.

2) that the shepherd is also aware of the perils and opportunities along the way. To be a Christian pastor means to be able to analyze present-day society and to lead the flock through it in its pilgrimage to the Kingdom.

3) that the shepherd does not hesitate to use the stout staff, as needed, on either wolves or sheep. To be a pastor means to be able to lead the flock with authority, pointing it towards the promised Kingdom, and rebuking it when it goes astray.

In other words, to be a pastor is to be a prophet, one who announces the will of God authoritatively in today's world. And this is true, not only of preaching, but also of all the various roles that traditionally have been ascribed to the pastoral ministry -- roles such as counseling, evangelism, education, and others.

Catherine: In terms of the counseling role of the pastor, a major charge by liberation theology is that much of counseling, both within and outside of the church, seeks to adjust the person to the society, even if that society's sinfulness and injustice is largely the cause of the person's unhappiness. It, therefore, preserves the unjust structures. That is a rather sweeping indictment and needs to be both critiqued and nuanced in order to be accurately applied.

The role of pastor as counselor has changed drastically over the past two generations. It has changed partly in the way in which "givens" have become alterable. Let me use marriage as an example to clarify this. At the turn of the century, if a husband or wife sought the counsel of the pastor in regard to a seriously unhappy marriage, most pastors would have had the working assumption that the marriage was a given. The need was to help the couple grow together, or, if the other party refused to be involved in any joint effort, to help the person who had come for counsel to adjust as well as possible to the given reality of the marriage and work within it.

For most pastors now, the assumption has changed. Granted we dislike the current divorce statistics, and not all marriages end for substantial causes. Nevertheless, we can say that a "given" of previous days is no longer given in our own day. We no longer believe that all marriages must be maintained. Some are so destructive that adjustment to them is seen as a worse alternative than an ending to them. Attitudes have changed.

But how does this apply to the wider society beyond the limited world of the family? We live in an unjust society, where racism and sexism are rampant and with economic and social structures that keep many of the poor permanently dispossessed, generation after generation. Many in the middle class find that they are replaceable cogs in a giant machine whose goals and methods are beyond their consent or their power to change. These are givens in our society. Often, we do not recognize their power to mold and misshape the lives of our parishioners. If one comes to us for counsel in the midst of personal turmoil, we are quite likely to look for the cause -and therefore the cure- in the private life of the person, rather than in wider society.

Part of this can be attributed to our own blindness. But surely part is due to the fact that the analogy with a marriage breaks down completely at this wider level. Under destructive circumstances, a marriage can be ended. But a hurting person cannot divorce the whole society. Problems between partners can be worked on jointly and perhaps be resolved. But how does the individual carry on such a dialogue with the whole society? Even sizable groups cannot manage such dialogue.

Perhaps, then, the wider societal causes of personal crisis that bring a church member to the pastor's office are best left alone and not noticed. They will not be cured soon, and we cannot tell the person to wait for a generation or so until society becomes more just. Perhaps adjustment to the present world is the best that can be done under the circumstances. This is at

least a line of reasoning that can explain, if not condone, the tendency to ignore in private counseling the wider causes of personal misery.

But the Gospel speaks very differently. It speaks of a victory now over the powers of evil, even in the midst of their apparent strength in our world. It says that in Christ we are more than conquerors. It tells believers that God is on their side now and they will win, even while they are being persecuted. It is a Gospel that calls for faithfulness in witnessing to God's Kingdom and its values even in the midst of a society that denies them.

Nor does this mean a cheap victory, an ignoring of the present evils. It means a recognition of them, a witnessing against them and for the Kingdom, a working toward that goal. But it also means, in the midst of this struggle, a sense of victory that has been made forever clear in the words "We Shall Overcome." This is the opposite of adjustment to what is. It is a living out of what will surely be in the midst of conditions that deny the coming reality. It is being in but not of the world.

Justo: This victory is not merely an inner victory, nor is it only a purely private one. There is certainly a sense in which it is still hidden. But that does not mean that it has no bearing on outward, communal realities. Likewise, the evils against which this victory is won by the Lamb of God are not only individual sin and guilt, but also racism, sexism, economic oppression, and the like. One of the complaints of liberation theologians regarding traditional theology, both liberal

and conservative, is that it has not sufficiently taken into account the corporate nature of human existence. And this criticism often focuses on some of the ways pastoral counseling is understood. Even when pastoral counseling is placed in a non-privatistic context, such as in group therapy, still most of the issues are dealt with as if sin, guilt and redemption were mostly individual matters.

At this point, what is required is the development of a form of counseling that helps groups deal with what are in truth group realities. For instance, how does a white church, as a whole, deal with the reality and the guilt of racism? Or, in a world marked by gross inequality, how does pastoral counseling help Christians deal with their responsibilities and with the sense that no solution seems to be within reach of the individual or of the church? Issues of lifestyle, prejudice, and runaway concentration of capital are not to be left to the field of social ethics or of community organization. They are a fundamental concern of truly holistic pastoral counseling.

In a way, some of the minority churches have already been practicing this. The hymn "We shall Overcome," which Catherine has just quoted, brings to mind a clear example of this. During the height of the civil rights movement, Black pastors had to do a great deal of counseling on the grand, communal scale. They had many issues to grapple with. One of these was the deeply rooted feeling of many Blacks that what they had been told about submission was true, that to claim their rights was unchristian. Another was the need to create a community spirit that

would be able to respond without violence to the white violence that was to be expected. In a way, at the very heart of the civil rights movement, particularly in its early stages, was a superb job of pastoral counseling, but one that many white seminaries would not recognize as belonging under that heading in their curricula.

This sort of counseling, which has been quite common in minority churches for some time, will hopefully become more common in predominantly white churches in decades to come. The changing world situation, where increasing numbers will be demanding --and taking-- their share of the world's bounty, will force the United States to face some drastic changes. Those changes will create serious trauma in traditionally affluent, white churchgoers. Will pastoral counselors deal with this situation in the traditional, privatistic manner, or will they be able to relate their counseling to issues of justice?

Catherine: The values we as individuals, or as congregations, actually live by are probably more accurately discerned by how we spend our money than by the words that we speak. The pastor has a leadership role in the stewardship of the church, and a ministry leading to greater justice must place great emphasis on this role. Church members do need to be helped to grow and think through far more radically than most have about their own income levels and their Christian commitments. Even the term "stewardship" is confusing. It often conveys the impression that whatever we have has been given us by God. Justice raises the question as to whether or not even that presupposition is true. Our income itself may be the result of

injustice. Does a stewardship program even consider lowering the income of congregational members as a prerequisite to authentic giving? Once we have considered income issues, we can then move on to the more usual questions of giving. What values are revealed by family budgets? I remember a Friends Meeting near my college that had the practice of elders calling on all families, inspecting their previous income tax returns, and then stating what fair share of the congregation's budget they should be expected to bear. That is a form of stewardship most of our congregations would resent enormously. But it may be far healthier than our present forms.

I also remember a national consultation on missions in my own denomination. In a discussion group, I heard one missionary to Latin America oppose completely any critique of capitalism. Of course it did lead to inequalities within a society. But to him, one of the good features was that it created some very wealthy people who gave far more to missions than that same money would create had it been more equitably distributed. I can add that the mission in which he was involved was one that sided with repressive regimes and eliminated from its own membership any who were critical of the government. His sources of money and his mission were related. The same is true for the local congregation as well. We cannot speak only of family and individual budgets. What about the congregation’s own budget? How much of the church's income is spent on self-maintenance areas of buildings, salaries, utilities, and so forth? What ought the budget of a congregation committed to justice look like? If a pastor manages to develop congregational stewardship to the point that twice as much money is given to the church, and yet the church's own budget is not in itself critiqued, justice may not have been

served at all. It is not better stewardship to raise the per capita giving and leave untouched the ways in which that money is spent by the congregation. The amount of money already available in local church budgets in this country is staggering. What matters is how it is used. It may take serious congregational struggles over budget issues to sensitize Christian families to the task of dealing with their own personal budgets. This is in itself a form of witness and education for the church.

Pastors who are committed to a ministry of justice cannot overlook the budget. Nor can they mention such issues in a few sermons just as the budget is presented and assume that the prophetic task has been done. Credibility on the issue of money can only be gained by a pastor whose whole ministry points to this, in administration, in education, and even in discussions of the pastor's salary. The acquiring and spending of money is the acid test of commitment to justice both for the congregation and the individual Christian.

Justo: Let us now look briefly at some issues having to do with evangelism. This is indeed a crucial area of responsibility for the pastor, and certainly for every Christian, for, what is Christianity if it is not good news? To proclaim the good news, to witness to the good news, to live as those who do believe the good news, that is what Christianity is all about.

And yet, this, too, must be seen from the perspective of a prophetic ministry. The good news of the Gospel is not indiscriminate good news. It is "good news to the poor." The good news is for

everybody, but it does not sound good to everybody. Had it been so, Jesus would never have been crucified. The "good news to the poor" does not sound so good to the rich. The good news for sinners, publicans and prostitutes does not sound so good to the religious and the Pharisees.

Today, there are many in our country who, in the name of good news, proclaim a so-called gospel that is colorless and toothless, that does not take into account the oppressive realities in which many live, and that therefore, out of a complicity of silence, is bad news to the poor, to racial minorities, to those on welfare, and to those overseas who suffer the consequences of exploitation by the present economic order.

At this point, the first task of the minister as an evangelist is to rediscover the good news of the Gospel. We must take the title of "evangelist" away from those who proclaim a "gospel" that is not good news to the poor, freedom to the captive, liberation to the oppressed, and the jubilee year of redistribution of God's bounty.

Secondly, we must look at the contemporary debate on what has been called the “homogeneous growth principle." There is no question that those who sing the praises of homogeneous growth are correct inasmuch as throughout history most Christian numerical growth has taken place along homogeneous lines. The point at issue among those involved in the debate is whether or not this should be used as a means of evangelism. At the risk of oversimplifying the issues, one could say that the debate takes place between those, usually

conservative theologians, who argue that the homogeneous principle ought to be accepted and used as a means of evangelism, and those, usually liberal theologians, who argue that such homogeneous growth has allowed North American Christianity to continue along its merry way, without challenging its own racist structures, much less those of society.

What both sides tend to ignore in this debate is the question of power and powerlessness, so crucial for liberation theology. Indeed, whether homogeneous growth ought to be encouraged or not has something to do with whether the churches so developed will result in the empowerment of the powerless, or simply in the further entrenchment of the powerful. It is not the same thing for a local church composed of rich and powerful people to remain homogeneous, as it is for a minority church to do so. The first does not challenge but rather reinforces the racist and classist structures of our society. The latter may well be the only point at which this particular minority may gain a foothold for such a challenge.

Finally, a word should be said about prophetic evangelism and church planning. I am sure that many of us have been at meetings where church development strategy has been discussed, and where it has been decided not to start a church in a particular neighborhood, or to close an existing one, because such a church had no chance of becoming self-supporting. Likewise, it is often decided to open a church in a new development because the people who will attend that church will soon be able to support it. This is not very different from the red-lining that we so deplore in banks. Ecclesiastical red-lining is no more ethical than that practiced by banks. And it

contradicts the stated basic purpose of the church in a way in which it does not contradict the avowed purpose of a bank.

Evangelism, like counseling, like stewardship, and like every pastoral activity, must be prophetic.

Catherine: The last area of the pastoral tasks of ministry that we can mention is education. In a sense, all that we have said thus far is pointing to a form of educating a congregation to justice issues through administration, counseling, stewardship, and evangelism. But there is also the more formal educational program of the church in which the minister has serious responsibility.

Frequently we are so concerned with the ongoing program that needs to be kept running with teachers, students, and materials, that the question of what is taught is thrust into the background. But we must be enormously concerned with what is communicated. One of our problems at the present time is the adults in our congregations who have grown up thinking that they understood the nature of the Christian faith in spite of the fact that they did not see the relationship of the Gospel and justice. If these same adults now teach another generation, we shall continue to have the problem. The task of Christian education at the moment, seen from the perspective of justice and liberation, is two-fold. It is to teach those new to the church the Biblical imperative of justice, and to help those long in the church *un*learn a limited and truncated view of the Gospel they learned curlier. In many respects, this second task is far more difficult.

At all levels, Christian education must expand the world horizons of Christians. The poor, those in other cultures, the victims of oppression at home and abroad must be seen. And they must be seen not only--or even primarily--as those who need our help, but rather as those who can help us understand the full meaning of the Gospel and a more accurate reading of Scripture. This might involve joint classes on occasion between a white suburban church and an inner-city minority church. It means concern for what curriculum material is used. Above all, it means a recapturing of the serious study of Scripture by the entire congregation, read with an awareness of its liberating implications.

If the full power of Scripture, authentically interpreted, is turned loose in the midst of a congregation, in all aspects of its life, that congregation will indeed be a witness to justice and a cause of justice for the whole world. Our task as pastors is to help that happen.