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**A LIBERATING HERMENEUTIC FOR THE RICH**

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**"Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition"**

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I.

At the Sixth Oxford Institute (1977) on the theme "Sanctification and Liberation" I presented a plenary paper entitled: A LIBERATING PASTORAL FOR THE RICH.<sup>1</sup> The question asked was: How would it affect the shape of our pastoral...if we believed the gospel now preached to us by the poor? The answer was given in five statements:

We are Pharaoh.

The God of the Bible is known only by doing justice.

In Jesus, God became poor.

'Evangelism' is confronting the atheism of our worship.

Hope for the liberation of the rich is available--as a gift from the poor.

Since 1977 experiences in Latin America and the United States have strengthened my conviction that the 'mainline' Protestant Churches in the United States are currently guilty of committing the historic Latin American Catholic error of linking themselves with and giving legitimacy to the dominant classes whose ideology produces and continues the oppression of poverty globally.

The principal tool for this role of our churches is a certain kind of bible study, which provides the perspective for viewing the faith and its relation to society. I come now to suggest that: more crucial than what we teach is how we teach.

To listen to those in the Majority ('Third') world who in their base communities turn to the communal study of the scriptures out of their communal struggles to claim life and humanity is to learn the determinative role of methodology (hermeneutic).<sup>2</sup>

They call our attention to two - mutually exclusive-methodologies: Elitist and Popular.

An elitist pedagogy is the method natural to us. It begins with the assumption that someone possesses a truth which is to be conveyed rationally, to be accepted or rejected by the mind of the hearer - and then applied to life. Truth is a 'thing' which stands apart from life until the believer 'applies' it to the life.

This pedagogy fits naturally with domination of one class over the masses.

Popular (from the people) pedagogy is the reverse of elitist pedagogy. It begins with life, especially circumstances and events in which the humanity of persons is threatened. Those threatened join themselves together to search for liberation from their oppression: through political action, prayer and bible study. Commitment precedes study. This pedagogy promises liberation to those oppressed by poverty.

Where does this leave us - students of the bible based in an affluent society?

## II.

Can a faith experience born out of a context of poverty be transplanted to a context of affluence? No and Yes.

No - we cannot learn from the oppressed poor by playing the game of trying to imitate their poverty experience.

Yes - by identifying our search for God with theirs we are forced to a new kind of contextual analysis of our reality.

We are not to imitate them. We are to design a new way of looking at life and faith which begins by identifying the ideology which shapes our view of God. This is a new hermeneutic for the rich which begins in a global analysis of our context. A methodology shaped by our needs, but impacted by their presence in our world.

"Global" is more than geography. It is not just an interest in world affairs nor being able to travel. To be global is to view the news, travel and everything else from a panorama which includes multi-perspectives different from our own-social, political, economic, cultural.

A global contextual analysis discovers that "our" world and "their" world are not two, but one world. This results in a crisis of faith for most of our constituencies, because of the way we have taught them to read the Bible.

I was given the opportunity to attempt to formulate a hermeneutic for the affluent informed by the hermeneutic of the oppressed poor by the invitation of the Woman's Division of the Board of Global Ministries of The United Methodist Church to write their annual bible study book for 1993 on Amos.

When I received the invitation I insisted those extending it should know how I would propose to do it. By becoming aware of the perspective of the oppressed poor, we who live in a

context of affluence can be helped to identify the perspective (usually hidden and unacknowledged) from which we view life and scripture. Those issuing the invitation not only agreed to my suggested approach, but said that was what they wanted. Indeed, it was why they asked me in particular to do it.

What resulted is a volume entitled: AMOS: WINDOW TO GOD.<sup>3</sup> The figure of window is used to avoid abstract talk about 'ideologies'.

Exercises are included to help identify four different "windows". In Chapter 1. Amos's window is defined by his own words, and put alongside the window dominant among the oppressed poor. In Chapter 5. We draw the window dominant in the United States, and then our own personal windows.

The principal message of Amos is studied through these four windows, as follows:

Chapter 2. GLOBAL JUDGMENT, based on the first two chapters of Amos which raise the question: What right does Amos have to pronounce judgment on nations whose god is not his God?

Chapter 3. WHAT IS WRONG WITH INJUSTICE? answers by a formula: injustice = oppressing the poor = sin.

Chapter 4. JUSTICE INTO POISON makes the point that the practice of injustice poisons spirituality.

Chapter 6. GLOBAL HOPE - Amos is full of threat, but through him we discover threat is the reverse side of hope.

Each chapter is structured as follows:

**What The Text Says:** passages from the scriptural text (in bold face type) for study in that session.

**What The Text Means:** interpretation of what Amos meant those passages to say.

**Making The Connection:** The pitfall of doing contextual analysis in 1989 for study in 1993, with the world changing so unpredictably, is obvious. I tried to relate Amos' perspective to two issues in each chapter which seem to have more than a passing life span.

In Chapter 2, on Global Judgment, the two contextual issues are: The 500th anniversary of the Columbus event, and the Holocaust. In these contexts the

question is asked: Can We Preach Christ in a Pluralistic World?

In Chapter 3. What Is Wrong With Injustice? The two contextual issues are: Economic Democracy and the Three Burdens of poor women - classism, racism and sexism.

In Chapter 4. Where Amos says that Injustice Poisons Spirituality, the two issues are: The Church as a Sanctuary of Justice and the Creation as a Holy Place.

The final chapter, GLOBAL HOPE, asks two questions: Is there hope for the rich? and What can I do?

This study of Amos is **about God**, not primarily about justice. It is designed to be a manual on personal spirituality not a social action pamphlet.

My personal perception is that Amos has been captured by the pulpit. All I have ever known Amos be used for was to give legitimacy to a preacher who wanted to be 'prophetic'. The effort here is to rescue Amos from the pulpit to the pew!

The quality of personal spirituality is determined by the nature of the God experienced. By looking at life through the eyes of Amos, and others very unlike us, we can encounter a God more adequate to our needs.

To help achieve this, at the end of each chapter is an exercise entitled: **Exercises in Personal Spirituality**. These are devotional exercises for revitalizing our personal spirituality by the message of that particular chapter.

#### EXPECTATIONS of this study of Amos:

We confess our need for a more adequate experience of God (spirituality). We begin with ourselves, not the text. We are not ready to read Amos yet. We must identify the perspective we instinctively use when we read scripture. By comparing our personal window with the dominant window of our class, and then comparing both with Amos's window and that of the Poverty World we may discover why we are blocked from full exposure to the God of the scriptures.

We discover justice not to be a characteristic of God but the nature of God from which all other characteristics of the Divine flow. Our conversion results when we accept this God as our God, and commit ourselves to God's Project.

### III.

#### PROPOSED AGENDA

I propose to this Working Group on Biblical Studies of the Ninth Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies an agenda for discussion at this Institute and for continuing development as members choose. Personally, I have neither the competence nor the time prior to this Institute to prepare finished answers to the questions here raised.

I have had experience which gives me confidence in advancing a hermeneutic. I now register the issues which, in light of our specific interest in "Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition", the Methodist Church needs developed for its liberation from contexts too narrow to be adequate to the fullness of the gospel.

The agenda is as follows:

1. An evaluation and further development of a LIBERATING HERMENEUTIC FOR THE RICH which, as here outlined, arises out of my vocation as a pastor of U.S. churches and as a missionary from Latin America.

2. An evaluation of the statement above that such a methodology results in a crisis of faith for most of our constituencies, because of the way we have taught them in the past in church school, sermons and seminaries to read the Bible.

This is because of a false analysis of the relation of 'conservatism' to 'liberalism'. An analysis so universally accepted I never hear it questioned. The liberalism referred to is the classic 1940 version and is contrasted to 'radical spirituality'. My vocation in the U.S. and Latin America has resulted in the following conclusions:

- 2.1. Conservatism and liberalism are alike on the crucial issues: both affirm the dominant system, both seek to correct evils which arise from the system, both are individualistic, rationalistic, and are committed to the elimination of ambiguity through dialogue and negotiation.

- 2.2. Though reluctant to use the label of 'liberal', the leadership of our church, including faculties of theological seminaries, and indeed the leadership of conservative movements characterize themselves in terms in which they define themselves as classic 1940 liberals.

2.3. In the face of global questions which have been and are being asked, beginning in the sixties, both camps give the same answers and are equally inadequate to the spirituality needs of persons of all classes and cultures.

2.4. Radical spirituality by contrast affirms God's Project to be "new heavens and a new earth", is incarnational, which is always ambiguous, communal, and confrontational.

So my second agenda item is to confront this question: Can we help persons trained in the hermeneutic of the dominant class to discover the more adequate message of scripture which the hermeneutic of the oppressed poor offers us by going beyond liberalism to a radical spirituality?

3. I invite members of this Working Group to test a thesis: For our constituents to understand the dynamic of the second stage of liberation movements, the Exile scriptures may be more helpful than the Exodus.

Luis Rivera Pagán, Puerto Rican Baptist, has a chapter on this thesis in Faith Born in the Struggle for Life: A Re-reading of Protestant Faith in Latin America Today<sup>4</sup> I quote from pages 62-63:

"The insistence of Latin American theology on the Exodus as the matrix experience that forges the national conscience of Israel and its vision of God and history is an important contribution to hermeneutics...

"Another event [however, must be] seen as decisive, the basic axis that forges the biblical consciousness: the captivity, the exile. The tragic drama of a devastated nation, the destroyed kingdom, and the captive people awakens terrible questions: Why does God permit his people, whom he had already liberated from the Egyptian oppression, to be destroyed? What does this say about God and sovereignty? What are the implications of the captivity for the destiny of the nation and its government? Does it lead to a definitive frustration with divine promises and the hopes of the people?

"A good part of the Old Testament has as its purpose the answering of these questions."

The appropriateness of the Exodus to peoples under the political domination of a dictatorship is obvious. As indicated in my 1977 paper to this Institute, in those

circumstances we know who Pharaoh is.

These early years of the 1990's, however, is a time in which we assume Pharaoh has been disposed of. But confusion follows because instead of peace and quiet resulting, there is chaos. Examples are everywhere: Latin America, Russia, Eastern Europe, South Africa....

In July of 1990 I did bible study for the Missionary Conference of the Board of Global Ministries of The United Methodist Church in which I began with these changed contexts, defined as viewed by persons inside, as contrasted to the shallow popular analyses believable from outside the events. We did this for Eastern Europe, South Africa and Latin America. Then we sought to define a theology of mission by referring to Exile scriptures which Jesus himself used to define his mission.

I can only list some of the contextual circumstances with which the Exile and Return faced God's People. The hermeneutical task, I suggest, is for us to see these same questions being asked by current changes in most of the countries of today's world:

3.1. How do we evaluate the quality of faith which is shaped and preserved by the experience of exile?

3.2. What are the modern equivalents of the choice between absorption into Babylon vs. return to Jerusalem?

3.3. What is the purpose of returning? Restoration of the pre-exilic society or a new creation?

3.4. Do liberated peoples search for unity or diversity? Are these mutually exclusive?

3.5. Are racial and national purity necessary to unity and survival?

3.6. Is there a modern counterpart to the debate between rebuilding the city walls vs. the temple?

Many other questions can be raised by members of this Working Group. The purpose is to study the experience of Exile and Return to illuminate the confusion and expectations of Christians in the face of current social, political, economic and cultural upheavals.

4. The specific question a liberation hermeneutic raises for us here and now is: Is it also a product of Wesleyan theology? If not, can it be made to be consistent with the Wesleyan tradition? We might even ask: is it an important question?

I personally am convinced that we have more resources for answering these questions than we are willing to use. For example, let us rejoice, listen to and learn from the witness of the Latin American Methodist Churches.

Two theological consultations of Methodists from the entire Latin American continent in Costa Rica in 1983 and Brazil in 1984 may be said to be a spin-off of the Seventh Oxford Institute. The theme of that 1982 Institute was: The Future of the Methodist Theological Traditions. The Latin American consultations were on the question: Is the theology of John Wesley and the Methodist tradition relevant to the current Latin American context?

I well remember the straight forward answer given by a participant from Bolivia: "If we discover that Father Wesley was committed to the poor, the answer is 'yes'. If not, the answer is, no he is not relevant."

My purpose for collecting and, with the help of Lewistine McCoy, publishing in English the work of 21 Latin American theologians, all but three Protestants, and most of them Methodists, was to make this resource available to Wesleyan scholars.<sup>5</sup>

I cite one other source which should be published in English: the Emory University Ph.D. dissertation of a member of this Working Group, Ely Eser Barreto César of Brazil. Entitled FAITH OPERATING IN HISTORY: NEW TESTAMENT HERMENEUTICS IN A REVOLUTIONARY CONTEXT I quote selected sentences to show its relevance to the theme of this Institute:

"The hermeneutical problem for Latin American Protestants became acute as it became evident that traditional Biblical interpretation was unable to help clarify the Church's mission to the poor...

"In the elaboration of a social scientific method Enrique Dussel showed how knowledge that is based on existing cultural values tends to ignore, as raw material, the existence and experience of the poor...

"This question was of continued concern to us while teaching New Testament at the Brazilian Methodist Seminary in Rudge Ramos, São Paulo...Important segments of the Methodist Church questioned the modern form of the Wesleyan tradition, comparing it with the original practice of Wesley in England

and examining it in the face of the vast growth of poverty...

"The option (for a liberating education) taken by UNIMEP (the Methodist University of Piracicaba)...called for a major revision of its elitist pedagogical practices, both in the life of the Church and in that of the educational institution.

"Within this new concept of mission which began to be articulated ... a very serious obstacle became increasingly evident: the traditional manner of reading the Bible."

The reason is the believing community sees its missionary journey to be to move from the center to the periphery. Through the model of Enrique Dussel we discover that the reality of the periphery is radically different. So this hermeneutical study by a Wesleyan, Latin American biblical scholar concludes: "The models of science elaborated from the center did not allow us to see nor to deal adequately with that reality. Our theme, emerging from outside the 'center' needed to be examined with the use of scientific lenses that are not normally in operation. We concluded that we needed to construct a completely new instrument for the re-reading of the Bible."

This fourth item on our agenda - asking the question as to whether the liberating hermeneutic of the oppressed poor is legitimately Wesleyan - points to our need to have available for the church in affluent societies the rich resources for answering that question which do exist in Methodist churches in poverty societies.

Someone -who better than the members of this Working Group- needs to call with unmistakable urgency on agencies of The United Methodist Church to make these existing resources available for the whole church.

These four agenda items are only a few guideposts which point all Methodists to the abundant meaning of "Good News to the Poor- and the rich - in the Wesleyan Tradition".

In this regard, I quote Howard Zinn, "The cry of the poor is not always just, but if you don't listen to it, you will never know what justice is."<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

1. **SANCTIFICATION & LIBERATION: Liberation Theologies in Light of the Wesleyan Tradition**, Edited by Theodore Runyon. Abingdon/Nashville. 1981. pp. 209-225.
2. **FAITH BORN IN THE STRUGGLE FOR LIFE: A Rereading of Protestant Faith in Latin American Today**. Edited by Dow Kirkpatrick, Translated by Lewistine McCoy. Eerdmans/Grand Rapids. 1988.
3. **AMOS: WINDOW TO GOD**, Dow Kirkpatrick. Spanish, **AMOS: UNA VENTANA A DIOS**. Board of Global Ministries/NY 1992. Available from Cokesbury, \$2.50.
4. See "Toward a Theology of Peace: Critical Notes on the Biblical Hermeneutic of Latin America Theology of Liberation", by Luis N. Rivera Pagán, **FAITH BORN IN THE STRUGGLE FOR LIFE**, pp. 52-75.
5. **FAITH BORN IN THE STRUGGLE FOR LIFE** cited above.
6. Howard Zinn, **A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES**, (Harper & Row/NY. 1980). p. 10.