

A CRITIQUE OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY BY A CROSS-CULTURALIZED CALVINIST

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We are standing on the threshold of the 1980s. Only two decades remain before the second millennium of the Christian era will have run its course. For almost two thousand years the gospel of the saving grace of God in Christ Jesus has been preached. Prior to Christ's coming God spoke in many and various ways to our fathers by the prophets (Heb 1:1), and through these prophets God promised beforehand the gospel that was to be fully realized in Christ (Rom 1:1, 2). Today, and for some time now, the minorities, the oppressed and the poor ask us what difference this preaching of the gospel is making for their external circumstances. Liberation theology has made this concern of the oppressed its concern.

As an Evangelical Theological Society we have existed a scant thirty-one years. During our brief existence we have sought to articulate the gospel that has been preached for thousands of years. We have also sought to discern the spirits to see whether they be of God. Part of that discerning of the spirits has been the examination of the various approaches and methods of interpretation that have been applied to Holy Scripture in an effort to unlock its meaning. Some of these approaches are in vogue for a while, and then they diminish or recede into the background. Half a century ago Ernst von Dobschütz compared the methods of Biblical criticism to fashions. They come and stay a while, and then they disappear.¹ The comparison is helpful, but it applies only partially. Methods of Biblical study never disappear completely. They leave a residue. Form criticism did not completely supplant source criticism. Tradition criticism, redaction criticism, rhetorical criticism, canon criticism—they all presuppose one another, even though each claims to do the job better than its predecessor.

What about liberation theology? Will it too fade away? Earlier in this century there was the social gospel approach. The 1960s witnessed the rise of political theology and the theology of revolution. The decade that is now about to close has seen the rise of liberation theology. We do not know what the future of this theology will be. At the present time, however, this movement presents us with a powerful challenge, and I am personally happy that evangelicals have accepted this challenge.

Scarcely four years ago an article in *Christianity Today* urged evangelicals "to become informed about the theology of liberation and allow this perspective to challenge their own."² I believe it can be said that this challenge has been heed-

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¹Cf. E. von Dobschütz, *Vom Auslegen des Neuen Testaments* (1927) 33, cited in S. Greijdanus, *Schriftbeginselnen ter Schriftverklaring* (Kampen: Kok, 1946) 156: "... dass diese Wege zum Verständnis wechseln wie die Moden, und ... die Angebote neuer Wege sich mit einer gewissen Gesetzmässigkeit nach 2-3 Jahrzehnten ablösen."

²C. H. Pinnock, "Liberation Theology—the Gains, the Gaps," *Christianity Today* 20 (1976) 390.

ed. In 1977 a little volume called *Evangelicals and Liberation* examined liberation theology from various angles.³ Only last year, at the thirtieth anniversary meeting of our Society, two papers addressed themselves to the question of liberation theology, and another two reviewed various aspects of black theology. At that same annual meeting there were papers dealing with the ordination of women and of persons with an alternative life style. Thus various aspects of liberation theology—Latin American liberation, black liberation, women's liberation and gay liberation—have been receiving attention among us.

The revival of evangelical interest in the social dimension of the gospel occurs within the larger context of the nation(s) here represented. Evangelicalism is beginning to be a force to be reckoned with also in the area of state and society. The September 1979 issue of *Sojourners* magazine details some of the amazing amount of activity displayed in the United States by a variety of conservative Protestant groups. The magazine reports⁴ that there are presently 1,300 radio stations in the United States that are owned and operated by Christians. Add to that the ever-growing number of television stations under Christian auspices, the huge publishing concerns turning out Christian literature, the Christian recording companies and the mushrooming movement of Christian day schools. A further sign of evangelical reawakening is the formation of groups of conservative voters in this country, seeking to influence the forthcoming presidential elections—not just as individuals but as a group.

In which direction all this will go is far from clear at the present time. "Born-again" Christians are weighing the political approaches of other Christians, equally "born again," and finding them wanting. What some evangelicals consider to be a necessary and obvious implication of the evangelical faith others judge to be a violation of the separation of Church and state and a throwback to the Middle Ages.⁵ What does appear from this manifold activity by evangelicals in the area of social and political concern is that the need for a discussion of what liberation theology is saying is more urgent than ever. Evangelicals now seem to be saying what liberation theologians have been saying—namely, that orthodoxy has something to do with orthopraxis. The question is whether the two are actually saying the same thing.

Admittedly, the term "evangelical" is a broad and comprehensive one. Stephen Knapp distinguishes between a Wesleyan, a Lutheran-Calvinist and a dispensationalist component within the evangelical movement.⁶ This distinction is helpful.

³*Evangelicals and Liberation* (ed. C. E. Armerding; Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977). For a more recent critique of liberation theology see also H. M. Conn's excellent articles in *Tensions in Contemporary Theology* (ed. S. N. Gundry and A. Johnson; Chicago: Moody, 1976; 3rd rev. printing, 1979) 327-434.

⁴This issue of *Sojourners* consists of an excerpt article taken from J. Rifkin and T. Howard, *The Emerging Order: God in the Age of Scarcity* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1979).

⁵Overseas evangelicals are beginning to take note of the political awakening of American evangelicals; see, e. g., the well-informed article by A. Kamsteeg, "Amerikaanse Evangelicals Gaan Zich Met De Politiek Bemoeien," *Nederlands Dagblad*, October 1979.

⁶Cf. Armerding, ed., *Evangelicals and Liberation*, 35, 36.

As was the case with the first president and co-founder of our Society, Clarence Bouma, the present speaker represents the Calvinist branch of the evangelical movement. Like my predecessor I am a native of the Netherlands and hail from Friesland, the same province he came from. This is a rather distinctive part of the Netherlands. In spite of many centralizing pressures and mild forms of discrimination it has maintained throughout the centuries its own distinctive language and culture.

As a cross-culturalized Calvinist from western Europe I hope I shall be forgiven for mentioning here a few further details concerning my personal background. I offer these not in order to focus on a person but rather to acquaint you with an evangelical community in another continent and another country and with the shape this community has given to its life and conduct under the authority of God's infallible Word.

I am one of six children born to godly parents of Reformed persuasion. Two distinct streams of Church separation and reform had come together in my family. On my mother's side I stem from the secession movement of 1834. My father's family came out of the second separation movement, that of 1886. In 1892 these two movements merged into what came to be known as the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (Reformed Churches in the Netherlands).

I believe it may be said that the secession movement was somewhat inclined toward pietism and stress on the inner life. Individualistic piety tended to favor the conventicle type of religious meeting at times. Nevertheless, the secessionists were ardent advocates of Christian day schools. In other words they showed that they had perceived the threat of secularism and were willing to find a social antidote for it. The Dutch government of that day did not favor these separate schools. In the year 1878 a law was drawn up that would be detrimental to the Christian school movement. Orthodox Christians organized a massive petition drive to seek to dissuade the king from signing the law. This drive helped galvanize the orthodox Christian community as never before. Though its immediate outcome was negative, inasmuch as the king did sign the law to which exception was taken, its long-range effects were felt for the next one hundred years and are still being felt. Annually a collection is held in support of Christian schools. The Christian schools in Holland having long received equal status before the law, some of this money is donated to school movements in other countries where the struggle for equality is still being waged.

The second movement of which I spoke, that of 1886, was largely spearheaded by Abraham Kuyper, whose name was also mentioned in the presidential address by Robert Saucy in 1972. Kuyper was a spiritual disciple of the Christian statesman Groen van Prinsterer, who for years represented the orthodox Dutch voters as their lone representative in the Dutch parliament.⁷ Kuyper's view of what it meant to be an evangelical believer was more comprehensive than that of the secessionists. It involved social, political and economic concerns. And it led to the establishment of the Free Reformed University of Amsterdam at a time when the

⁷For a good summary of Groen's life and witness in the public arena cf. M. R. Langley, "The Witness of a World View," *Pro Rege* 8/2 (December 1979) 3-11. The life of Groen van Prinsterer, a highly placed Dutchman of noble birth, was both "pious and public."

state universities were dominated by the philosophy of religious liberalism and political conservatism.

These two movements helped shape the community in which I grew up, and they also had a profound effect on me personally. So in my family we sang the songs of Zion; we longed for heaven, which we knew to be our home and blessed destiny; and we realized that our life on earth was a pilgrimage to fairer lands above. One could say that the life-style of my home was marked by a considerable emphasis on separation. The daily newspaper that came to our home was a Christian newspaper. It reported all the news that is fit to print when judged from a Christian editorial viewpoint. There was another, so-called "neutral," newspaper printed in the province. But we did not cast an eye on it. At the time when radio began to be common there were Christian programs of good cultural caliber to which we could listen a few days of the week. Of course there was at our disposal a full-fledged system of Christian schools to which the children could go. These schools were then state-supported.

Yet the outlook of my community was far from individualistic. There was, among other things, the emphasis on the covenant to which believers and their children were thought to belong. This kept us from having an atomized view of the Christian community. There was also a choice of Christian organizations, covering the various segments of societal life, to which one could belong. In our young men's societies at church we would not only study the Bible and the creeds. From time to time there would also be essays dealing with political and societal matters, treated from a Biblical and Reformed perspective. These societies often turned out to be an excellent training ground for future leadership.⁸

The various godly influences within the home and the Christian church and community created in me the desire to be a follower of Jesus. In my later teens I publicly owned him as my Savior before the congregation of God. Yet, although I knew him as my Savior, it was not until I came to this country that I encountered the expression "accepting Christ as one's personal Savior." He had been my personal Savior all along. But he had been more than that. He also had been a cosmic Savior and a cosmic Christ.

I have presented the above background sketch to indicate the existential angle from which I approach the matter of liberation theology. Having come to these shores at the age of twenty-four I know from experience what it means to be cross-culturalized. As a member of a minority segment of the Dutch population I think I can be somewhat sympathetic to those who feel alien within their own country. And as one who has had protracted experience as a Bible translator I believe I have developed a sensitivity for the need of contextualizing the gospel.

⁸I shall not here discuss at length Max Weber's thesis that Calvinists are so busy in the commercial and social sector in order to escape the only "logical" conclusion of the doctrine of election, that of fatalism. This thesis is repeated over and over again; cf. J. L. Segundo, *Liberation of Theology* (New York: Orbis) 21. See also Rifkin and Howard, *Emerging*, where it is stated that Calvin asserted that "unceasing physical work was the individual's only 'sign' or possible proof of election." In my own experience the doctrine of election has never cast the least bit of "shadow" upon the assurance of my faith. Cf. also what a classic Reformed statement of election and reprobation, the Canons of Dort, says about this matter in chap. 1, article 12. The "fruits of election" whereby the elect may be assured of their election are "pointed out in the Word of God" and consist of such things as "true faith in Christ, filial fear, a godly sorrow for sin, a hungering and thirsting after righteousness." Unceasing physical work is not among them.

Moreover, as a Calvinist I applaud all attempts to combine orthodoxy with orthopraxis—not just in works of philanthropy and missions, not just in privatized forms of religion and personal witness, however important these are in my estimation, but also in the larger structures of state and society. When Gary Jarvin, one of the spokesmen for the conservative political caucus “Christian Voice,” states that it “is a moral imperative for Christians to become active politically” I can only assent to such a statement from the depths of my heart, even though I will probably find myself disagreeing rather vigorously with some of the uses of Scripture one finds among his followers. For example, I do not know why on the basis of Scriptural teaching one should come out quite clearly against adoption of the SALT II treaty.⁹ Neither would I, with my amillennial hermeneutics, be able to affirm that Genesis 12 teaches that we will be blessed if we support the state of Israel. There may be other—and, for that matter, Scriptural—reasons why one should support the state of Israel. But Gen 12:3 would not appear to be one of these reasons.

The job, therefore, that we as evangelicals have to do—and this applies also to our evaluation of the various types of liberation theology—is to struggle hard with the question of how to interpret the Word of God. For example, am I as a male, adhering to the divinely-revealed principle of the headship of man over woman, expected to apply this principle in exactly the same way as did Paul, who wrote for a different time and faced different circumstances from our own? Questions of this sort have been raised in our evangelical community before. I hope they will continue to be raised until it pleases God, under the direction of his Holy Spirit, to grant us the necessary light to answer them. In the meantime I am convinced of one thing: that as a Christian I may not prescribe anyone else’s ethical conduct or restrict it in any way unless I can do so with a “thus saith the Lord.” It is true, of course, that a Christian community can only act by the insights God gives it at a certain time in history. Yet we may also learn from the lessons of the past. What used to be a “thus saith the Lord” fifty years ago has subsequently been sometimes perceived to be a matter of ethical adiaphora.

The true test of the liberation movement is not whether this movement agrees with one’s personal background and inclinations or whether it conforms to the doctrinal tenets he or she has learned from childhood. The real test lies in its conformity to the Word of God rightly understood. This is why the hermeneutical question continues to be of primary importance. To this question I will now give some attention.

Liberation theologians themselves have addressed this question. The first chapter of Juan Luis Segundo’s book *Liberation of Theology* is entirely devoted to a discussion of hermeneutical matters. Speaking about what he calls the hermeneutic circle, Segundo states that there is a need for a “continuing change in our interpretation of the Bible which is dictated by the continuing changes in our present-day reality.”¹⁰ Robert McAfee Brown echoes this sentiment by calling for a “hermeneutic of suspicion” that will subsequently lead to a “hermeneutic of en-

⁹The Southern Baptist Convention is on record as favoring this treaty. The above words were originally spoken before Russia’s invasion of Afghanistan.

¹⁰Segundo, *Liberation*, 8.

gagement.”¹¹ Still another statement concerning the hermeneutical task as seen by liberation theologians comes from Gustavo Gutierrez, who asserts: “That which is called the fundamental hermeneutical problem of theology is not actually the problem between systematic and historical theology, between dogma and history, but it is the relationship between theory and practice, between the understanding of the faith and social practice.”¹²

Evangelical scholars, in their evaluation of liberation theology, have rightly pointed out that the hermeneutics of this theology is a hermeneutics of history rather than Scripture. It is a hermeneutics of the world instead of the Word.¹³ History is seen as the key to hermeneutics. In addition to this, liberation theology places great stress on the unity of history. There are, so Gutierrez informs us, not two histories, one profane and the other sacred. Rather, “there is only one human destiny, irreversibly assumed by Christ, the Lord of history.”¹⁴ In this connection Gutierrez follows closely the approach of Gerhard von Rad, who maintains that certain passages in Isaiah and the Psalms suggest that the Bible sometimes views creation as an act of redemption. This prompts Gutierrez to assert that the “salvific action of God underlies all human existence.”¹⁵

But do the texts cited prove the point? Do they teach that there is here a “fusion” between “faith in creation” and “salvific faith”? An after-dinner address is not the place to engage in extensive exegetical discussion. Nevertheless, in order to provide some substance for my critique I shall evaluate briefly some of the passages mentioned. These passages are Isa 42:5, 6; 43:1; 44:24b-28; 51:9 and 54:5.

In Isa 42:6 God calls the servant in righteousness and takes hold of his hand. He does so as the One who created the heavens and stretched them out, and as the One who gives breath to the people of the earth and life to those who walk on it. I believe that this passage teaches no more than that the Lord who created all things is also powerful enough, as Creator, to sustain his servant in the performing of his salvific work. Gutierrez himself says, and correctly so, that this passage teaches that “Yahweh is at one and the same time Creator and Redeemer.” But this in my estimation falls short of saying that creation and redemption coincide or fuse together. The two are viewed in close conjunction but not as interchangeable.

Isa 43:1 uses the word “create” for the bringing into being of Jacob/Israel as God’s covenant nation. But does this support the thesis that Isaiah views creation itself as a salvific act? I am not convinced it does. All that Isaiah does is to compare the power and the initiative God displayed when calling Israel into being

¹¹Cf. R. M. Brown, *Theology in a New Key* (Philadelphia: Westminster) 80.

¹²This quotation is from A. G. Honig, *Jesus Christus, de Bevrijder* (Kampen: Kok, 1975) 13. Cf. also G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis, 1973) 13, where the phrase “a political hermeneutics of the Gospel” is used. In the fall issue of *Theological Education* the question is asked, “Is there a canon within the canon centering on the hermeneutical principle of the oppressed?” Several respondents to this question rightly take issue with it.

¹³Cf. H. Conn in Armerding, ed., *Evangelicals and Liberation*, 101.

¹⁴Gutierrez, *Theology*, 153.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

with the power and initiative he displayed at creation. It is for this same reason that later on, in the NT, believers can be called "new creations."

But what about Isa 44:24 ff.? These verses are often cited as offering some of the strongest support for the thesis here investigated. It must be granted that this is indeed a striking passage. First of all the Lord is said to be Israel's Redeemer, who formed it from the womb. Subsequently the prophecy enumerates some of God's mighty acts at creation. Then follows immediately another reference to a redemptive, salvific entity: Jerusalem. Of Jerusalem it is said that it shall be inhabited and of the towns of Judah that they shall be built. Nevertheless, the precise point of a fusion of creation and redemption is not proven even by this passage. Close interaction, yes—but no interchangeableness or identification.

We cannot here enter upon all the passages cited in support of this thesis. An exception must be made, however, for Isa 51:9. In this passage the prophet, in a powerful apostrophe, addresses the "arm of the LORD." He urges it to "awake" and to clothe itself with strength as in the days of old. He then proceeds to recall how this "arm" cut Rahab to pieces and pierced the monster through. Does this imply a fusion between what God did at creation and what he did redemptively? Everything depends on how one views the Rahab figure here. Does it here stand for a figure of primeval time suggesting a battle at creation between the forces of chaos and Yahweh the Creator? If Rahab must be so understood then there is indeed a reference to creation at this point. But if, as is clear from Isa 30:7, the Rahab figure in Isaiah's days was a cipher for the historical power of Egypt then there is no reference to creation. It may be that the language used to describe the exodus events is reminiscent of what happened at creation. But this would not be different from what occurs in Isa 43:1. The drying up of the sea, the waters of the "great deep," has for its primary reference the events of the exodus. It is this miraculous event that made it possible for the "redeemed" to cross over. If we see it correctly, Isaiah is here speaking of only one thing, the redemption from Egypt, and not of two things, creation and redemption together.

Gutierrez' discussion does not excel in clarity at this point. On the one hand the assertion is made that the "Creator of the world is the Creator and Liberator of Israel." This I believe to be a Biblical statement. But it does not follow that "creation . . . is regarded [as] . . . a historical salvific fact which structures the faith of Israel."¹⁶

It would appear, therefore, that liberation theology's hermeneutical elevation of the one and undivided history of God's salvific acts in time is not sufficiently supported by Scripture. Nevertheless, it would be erroneous to read the Biblical creation account as if it were entirely separate from the redemptive account that follows. Creation is narrated from the point of view of redemption. The real core and center of the Pentateuch, as earlier conservative interpreters have correctly stated, is God's covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai. The pre-redemptive account of the creation and fall is preliminary to what God does in saving man. This is generally a wholesome and Biblical emphasis, and it avoids the confusion that presently marks our contemporary discussion.

A second hermeneutical weakness of liberation theology is its exemplaristic

¹⁶Ibid., 156.

use of Scripture. H. J. Schilder called attention to this in an address delivered in 1974.¹⁷ Exemplarism is the name given to the approach to Scripture that dissolves Biblical history into isolated Bible stories, each with its own individual moral or ethical example. The alternative to this exemplaric use of Scripture is the redemptive-historical approach.

Those who assail exemplarism grant that there are occasions where the Bible uses earlier redemptive history by way of example for those who follow later. But they point out that, even when this is done, there never is a simple equation between the earlier and the later. The NT Christians who in 1 Corinthians 10 are warned to avoid the rebelliousness of the Israelites during the desert journey are told at the same time that upon them—i. e., the NT congregation—"the end of the ages" has come (1 Cor 10:11). Of OT believers this could not be said. There is, therefore, redemptive historical progress.

The same applies to Hebrews 11. In that chapter it is made plain that the heroes and heroines of the faith looked from afar at that which the NT congregation possesses in its incipient fulfilment (Heb 11:13, 39, 40).

On the other hand, when the OT looks back at its own history—as it does, e. g., in Joshua 24 and 1 Samuel 12—it does not put the emphasis on example from human faith and human conduct. Instead, it places God's acts in the center. It is the rehearsal of these acts of God that is designed to move the people to faith and repentance. This parenetic purpose is gloriously accomplished. Responding to Joshua's prophetic survey of redemptive history the Israelites do not say, "We wish to do and to be as Abraham our forefather did and was." This is what Israel says: "Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods. It was the LORD himself who brought us . . . up out of Egypt. . . . He protected us . . . and drove out before us all the nations. . . . We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God" (Josh 24:16-18).

The example method tends to place man and not God in the center, it is psychologizing and subjectivistic, it focuses on the order of salvation and not on the history of salvation. Yet good examples, even when gathered from the Bible, cannot save anyone, and neither can the avoidance of bad examples. Before casting stones at others, however, we as evangelicals should recognize that this method is widespread among us. Many a sermon drawn from historical materials of the Bible has been preached along these lines, and books on the study of "Bible characters" abound.

Still there is a danger in this. Christ, the Savior of mankind and the Lord of history, emerges from the pages of redemptive history. He does not emerge from a book full of moral examples. A Christ detached from "all that the prophets have spoken" (and this probably involves both the "former" and the "latter" prophets) is a different Christ from that presented in the gospels. How then can we permit the Bible to dissolve into just so many Bible stories with a moral import? Portraying Jesus as the model of the revolutionary whose example we are urged to follow is a consequence of this method in certain kinds of liberation theology.

¹⁷For a summary of this address see J. Francke, *De Jongste Theologie* (Groningen; De Vuurbaak, 1975) 145-151; cf. also Honig, *Jezus*, 15. Honig agrees with Schilder as to the exemplaristic use of Scripture in liberation theology, although he also sees attempts at a more redemptive-historical approach. The problematic—redemptive-historical versus exemplaristic—is explored in S. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (dissertation; Kampen: Kok, 1970) *passim*.

This leaves us little of the Christ of the Scriptures in the comprehensive and Biblical sense of the term.

I shall mention one more instance where in my estimation the hermeneutics of liberation theology is faulty. It has to do with the distinction between those who are and those who are not God's people. This distinction is obliterated in liberation theology. As Stephen Knapp says of the liberation theologians: "The people of God, for them, has lost any sense of particularity." By way of example Jose Miranda, in his book *Marx and the Bible*, goes to great lengths analyzing the root *šāpat* and the noun *mišpāt* and makes many worthwhile observations in the process. I think we may agree that "to judge" in the Bible often means "to save from oppression," although the idea of "verdict" and "sentence" is not entirely lacking. But the important question is this: Who are the oppressed in the Bible that are being saved? Are they not God's chosen people, Israel? And does not the OT draw a clear line of distinction between those "who know not the LORD" (Ps 79:6) and those who do? In Ps 147:19, 20 the psalmist exclaims in wonder that the Lord "has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel," and then he proceeds: "He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his law." In view of this undeniable teaching concerning the particularity of the people of God one is led to the conclusion that there is some hermeneutical pre-understanding that makes it impossible for liberation theology to perceive this message.

Yet it was to save "his people" from their sins that Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem (Matt 1:20). The joy that the angels proclaimed was to be for "all the people" (Luke 2:10). The same applies to the social protest of the OT prophets. When in the days of Micah God rebukes the rich for oppressing the poor he speaks of "the women of my people" that are being victimized (Mic 2:9). Moreover the deliverance the judges wrought was not just a deliverance of any nation from the oppression of any other nation. It was the deliverance of Yahweh's people. This is the only context in which Deborah's words must be understood: "So may all your enemies perish, O LORD! But may they who love you be like the sun when it rises in its strength" (Judg 5:31). A gospel that universalizes the message of liberation ceases to be the truly good news that must be preached to all.

The above is not meant to deny that the notion of the "people of God" is today defined in other terms than was the case in the OT. Ethnically the people of God is made up of members taken from all the nations of the earth. But qualitatively the particularity of salvation has not changed.

The year 1979 was the Year of the Child. Much has been done to bring the plight of disadvantaged children before the attention of the world community. Yet at the end of this year the report of the United Nations concerning the condition of children in many lands is as grim as ever. There still is a large percentage of children undernourished, poorly housed, afflicted with disease, and facing an early death. We should be deeply moved by such conditions. The gospel has been preached too long in this world to allow such conditions to continue. But we also know that it may be many, many years before there is an appreciable improvement in the outward circumstances of the oppressed. Must they, in the meantime, be comforted with a theology of liberation that because of its universalism leaves the heart of the gospel unsaid? Must they be told that because they are poor God is on their side without also being told that poverty in the OT as well as

in the NT means to be poor in spirit?¹⁸ To counter this universalistic use of the word "poor" it is not enough to say, as is sometimes done by the "young evangelicals," that the poor need to be converted as well as the rich. What should be said, on the basis of Biblical teaching, is that *it is the converted who are the poor*. The poor are equated with the remnant (Zeph 2:3; 3:12-13). The poor are those who "cry" to the Lord (Ps 34:6). But who that is dead in trespasses and sins will do so savingly unless he is touched by the Spirit?

Yet for all its serious shortcomings liberation theology offers a challenge to us all. From what I have said it will be evident that the call on the part of the minorities, the alienated and the oppressed strikes a responsive chord in my heart. It does, so I believe, in the heart of all of us, regardless of our background and cultural context.

Does evangelicalism have the Biblical vigor and the organizational coherence to offer an alternative response to the crying needs of so many of our fellow human beings? Or does it, as Charles Kraft has stated, occupy a rather "amorphous middle position between a left-wing capitulation to ethnology-sociology and a right-wing reaction to the same disciplines"?¹⁹ At the present time the answer to that question may well have to be positive. But Christians never just accept the status quo. Christians know they are caught up in a mighty movement of God's work here on earth. They know they are to be "letters . . . known and read by all men" (1 Cor 3:2). They also know that a "living and holy sacrifice" must be rendered before God in this world, consisting in the transformation of ourselves by the renewal of our mind (Rom 12:12).

This is why I fondly believe that, after much further reflection as to what the Bible really teaches, evangelicals may well be the God-intended instrument to meet the demands of the oppressed more adequately than this is done today. May God give us grace to rise to the occasion. While keeping our eyes on heaven where our citizenship is, let us be found working while it is day, doing the Lord's work till he comes.

¹⁸See the discussion of *ptôchos* in *TWNT* 6 (1959) 904 n. 175. The words "in spirit" are not a "Zusatz," argues the writer. "Denn Mt hat lediglich einen in *ἁνωμιμ* enthaltenen u. vielleicht schon vor ihm durch *ρουῆ* verdeutlichten Begriffsinhalt griech. umschrieben." R. M. Brown's polemic against spiritualizing the economic aspect of the notion "poor" is generally well-taken, but it is unbalanced. When Brown concedes that Jesus was also "concerned about the inner, spiritual dimension of human existence as well as the other physical, political and social dimension" he fails in my opinion to probe the notion of the "poor in spirit" to its fullest depth. Sin and salvation should also be taken into account. See Brown, *Theology*, 82.

¹⁹Armerding, ed., *Evangelicals and Liberation*, 100.