
Liberation Theology and the Ulster Question

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Religious, political and cultural divisions in Northern Ireland have erupted into the most prolonged period of violence which the State has known since its formation in 1921. The alienation of the two communities is very deep and the Ulster Question has brought both frustration and fear to successive British Governments. Many lives have been maimed or destroyed, while countless hearts have been broken and homes shattered as a result.

A higher proportion of the population in Ireland, Protestant and Roman Catholic, attend church regularly than in any other country in Western Europe, and yet hopes of reconciliation and a lasting peace in the community are very low. Around the world the cause of Christ has been dishonoured by the conflict in Northern Ireland, while in Ireland itself, both north and south, there is an increasing drift from the Church.

Those churchmen who have been most vocal have not always displayed a spirit of love, understanding or reconciliation, preferring a polemical spirit which has often fuelled the fires of an idolatrous nationalism in both communities. One evangelical has recently challenged those who respect the Scriptures: "How much genuinely biblical thinking has been done about the underlying causes of the troubles?"¹

New Challenge

A new challenge to Christian thinking has come from the impact of Liberation Theology. This has come to Ireland mostly through the influence of Irish Roman Catholic missionaries. The Northern Ireland problem is believed by some to be a close parallel to some 'third world' situations where Liberation Theology is developing. International capitalism and British imperialism have, it is claimed, oppressed and exploited the Irish people but have failed to extinguish their desire for the completion of the liberation of Ireland, a task only begun by the Easter Rising of 1916. The following dialogue with Liberation Theology can be profitable if the result is a deeper understanding of Scripture and of the contemporary needs of our society and a renewed desire to live out the will of God, thus making the love of Christ visible.

Problems of History

Some understanding of the history of the Church in Ireland will give helpful background to our present situation.

When the Reformation came to England there followed some half-hearted attempts to establish the Reformation in Ireland. The Irish language was not used in the services and the Scriptures were not yet translated into Irish. The

Church historian, James Seaton Reid, laments the practice of “employing exclusively, as the agents of this work, the natives of a Kingdom against which the Irish were deeply and justly incensed. By this means the reformed religion became unhappily identified with England.”²

Queen Elizabeth had little zeal for the spread of the Gospel, but her Irish wars led to the extension of English rule in Ireland. When the last of the Gaelic chieftains fled to Europe in 1607, their vast estates were confiscated and granted to English and Scottish settlers. This seizing of Catholic lands has been resented ever since and has left behind a structural inequality where it is usually Protestants who own the most and best of the land.

The Plantation population experienced a gracious period of revival in the 1620's. However, this had little effect on the native Irish and the brutalities of the 1641 rebellion increased the settlers' feelings of insecurity and the development of what has been described as the siege mentality. Cromwell did his utmost by a combination of military force and evangelism to overthrow the Catholic Church in Ireland. However, the general result of his policy “was to deepen the gulf between Protestant and recusant (Catholic), and to strengthen the recusant's conviction that they would never be safe under a Protestant Government.”³

It is of great interest to note that there was a period of Irish history when many Presbyterians had common cause with Roman Catholics against the injustice of the ‘penal laws’ which discriminated against both and in favour of Ireland's small Anglican élite. The significance of the unsuccessful insurrection of 1798 led by the United Irishmen has lived on in the hopes of Irish Republicans that it would be possible to unite Catholics and Protestants in the pursuit of an Ireland free of English rule. This tradition of revolutionary violence has never wholly died out in Ireland.

However, by the nineteenth century, Presbyterian radicalism declined and a defensive mentality prevailed as the Protestant community rallied to protect their Protestant ascendancy. Last century also saw a major effort by English Evangelicals to evangelise Ireland. This so-called ‘Protestant crusade’ was no doubt motivated by a genuine concern to free Catholics from the burden of their sin but also by a desire to bring the blessings of British civilisation to the Irish. Their efforts had only limited success and one of the unintended results was to stir up community conflict and to increase hatred of England.

The anti-British feeling of many Irish Catholics was sadly confirmed by the Great Famine of the 1840's. It is estimated that as a result of the Famine one million people died. Though many English Evangelicals responded generously to the relief of need, the English Government acted hesitantly and half-heartedly. Such were the tensions of the time that Protestants who offered aid were falsely accused of using relief measures as a means of bribing Catholics to turn to Protestantism.

Other factors which brought division were separate schooling, the association of Gaelic culture with Catholic nationalism and the campaign for Irish independence or home rule. The Ulster Protestants believed that ‘Home Rule’

would mean 'Rome Rule'. Despite their invocation of divine aid and their expression of loyalty to the Crown, the 200,000 signatories to Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant pledged themselves to "use all means" to defeat Home Rule. They were in fact preparing themselves to defy the constitutional authority of the British Parliament.

The eventual partition of Ireland satisfied the Protestants of Ulster but seemed to be a surrender to violence, a thwarting of democracy and an injustice to the nationalist (Catholic) population in Northern Ireland. In spite of early clashes, the 1922 Settlement brought a degree of tranquility which was the opportunity for the healing of old wounds.

The Present Troubles

By the 1960's the lot of many people in Northern Ireland was improving and yet this was the time when the present conflict began. It has been pointed out that revolt has come in many societies "not at the time of greatest deprivation but a time of rising expectations".⁴ The rising generation of Catholic young people, stimulated by student activism in the United States, France and Germany, inspired by the American Black Civil Rights movement and frustrated by the conservatism and sectarianism of the Stormont Government, now began to organise a mass movement of opposition to the Government.

By focusing only on the violence which resulted, many Protestants too quickly condemned this movement and dismissed its concerns. However, the charges of discrimination in employment, housing and electoral practices, though exaggerated, cannot be totally refuted. Faced with a moderate reforming programme, the Government dithered while the initiative seemed to go to the extremists on both sides. Extreme 'loyalists' condemned every reform as a victory for violence and a step towards the destruction of the State. Extreme republicans saw every delay in reform as further confirmation that they would never achieve justice in the Northern Ireland State. Both sides included men who were prepared to take up arms to advance their cause.

The Development of Liberation Theology

Liberation Theology is a movement which is attempting to develop "a new way to do theology"⁵ from within the context of oppression and human need. Beginning with the 'scientific analysis' of the social reality, the theology of liberation seeks a new understanding of God as the One who sides with the oppressed and calls His Church to work for radical change in the world. Though it is primarily associated with Latin America, the theologians of many countries, facing different kinds of oppression (racism, sexism, etc.) are contributing to the development of the theology of liberation. For this reason it is now more accurate to speak of the theologies of liberation rather than merely the theology of liberation, though both terms continue to be used. There is now an enormous and still expanding literature on the subject.

Liberation Theology has grown out of the 'sinful situation' of the poverty and underdevelopment which has clearly been perpetuated by western countries for their own advantage. The Catholic Church has historically been linked to

the oppressive forces of colonialism and the ruling élites. The Catholic hierarchy has in various ways opposed the new ideas which have nevertheless continued to develop, especially in the Catholic Church.

A group of radical Protestant theologians developed in their thinking “from a predominantly Barthian theology to a theology of God’s transforming action in history greatly indebted to Paul Lehmann and Richard Shaw until Ruben Alves gave it creative expression in critical dialogue with Marcuse on the one hand and Moltmann on the other.”⁶ God was said to be present in the struggle for humanisation and the Church was urged to join him and become a “revolutionary church”.

Two strands within Liberation Theology are represented by two Catholic priests who have each had a profound influence upon the movement. One of them, Fr. Camilio Torres, was shot dead on 15 February 1966 by government forces while leading his band of guerillas. The other, Archbishop Helder Camara of Brazil, has been described as “an aggressive and practical pacifist”.⁷ He himself spoke of ‘the spiral of violence’ which he saw in Latin America. The ‘first violence’ is the oppressive power of the system; this is resisted by violence which in turn provides more violence and repression. Camara believes that armed revolt is legitimate but impossible and prefers to speak of ‘peaceful violence’ and claims kinship with Martin Luther King.

Liberation Theology claims to be a universally valid way to do theology and says that “the task of Christian theology, wherever it may be developed, is the systematic effort to re-read history from the viewpoint of the rejected and humiliated.”⁸

A Theology for Ireland?

A wide variety of Irish theologians (clerical and lay) have begun to interact with Liberation Theology and to endeavour to develop it or build on it in the Irish context. At a conference on Liberation Theology organised by the Student Christian Movement, a Dublin priest called on the Church to take a political stance against the injustice and deprivation experienced by the Dublin slum-dweller. Another lecturer, John Maguire, described the Irish economic situation in terms of neo-colonialism and foreign exploitation. In his view this system is maintained by an extremely authoritarian government with very strict emergency powers and by “a church that is extremely conservative politically”.⁹ Maguire makes no apology for his Marxist outlook.

Paedar Kirby has written extensively on Liberation Theology and is extremely critical of the Catholic Church for being out of touch with the social needs of its people. On Northern Ireland Kirby is critical of the Church for not analysing the structural causes of the conflict and for assessing the situation in a static way: “there is a lot of violence. Violence is not Christian” and the result of this is that “the Church has no role in this problem because there is no historical analysis of what has been causing these problems.”¹⁰

Michael Garde, a Protestant layman, attacks loyalists such as Rev. Ian Paisley because he “takes the Province of Ulster as a given absolute which can be separated from the whole history of Ireland.”¹¹ Garde, clearly sympathetic to

Liberation Theology, views the situation as one dominated by British imperialism and an Orange State which cannot be reformed.

Enda McDonagh, Professor of Moral Theology at Maynooth, takes a much more critical approach to the Marxist influence on Liberation Theology. He wonders if there is any country in the world where Marxism “actually led to the liberation of a dependent people and not to a new form of slavery.”¹² A much more wholehearted supporter of Liberation Theology is Fr. Joe McVeigh. He contends that the Church must be on the side of radical, social and political change and that “the image of a middle-class clergy cannot be justified”.¹³ He says that “the Christian response to the conflict in Northern Ireland, I believe, must be along the lines suggested by Liberation Theology.”¹⁴ He favours a “consciousness-raising” type of education rather than the bomb and gun as the way to achieve the new society.

The man who has gone furthest in adopting a liberationist stance is Fr. Des Wilson, a controversial figure who lives in an ordinary house in one of the most deprived areas in West Belfast. Wilson strongly supports Sinn Fein, the political party which supports and justifies the armed struggle of the IRA. While his own bishop has warned Catholics not to vote for Sinn Fein, Wilson commends the party as “the reasoned choice of a dignified people”.¹⁵ He claims to be following the example of Archbishop Helder Camara in “refusing to condemn those Christians who took arms in the struggle for justice.” Wilson believes that “what the British Government is doing in Ireland is unjust, vicious and degrading”¹⁶ and asserts his view that “there is no way out of this impasse except by some kind of force.”¹⁷ Wilson himself would hope for some kind of non-violent direct action but he is convinced that something radical will have to be done, and the sooner the better.

The Distinctive Method of Liberation Theology

In making a more detailed assessment of Liberation Theology the following features are clearly prominent:

A Call to Praxis

The Scriptures challenge the Christian to “do the truth” (1 John 1:6) and to “not merely listen to the word” (James 1:22). We know that the Gospel must be worked out in terms of concrete action and that orthopraxis is just as vital as orthodoxy. However, for Liberation Theology **praxis** is more than the point where belief issues in action. It “takes much of its meaning from its use in Karl Marx as the call for response arising out of the historical movement.”¹⁸ Praxis is a particular kind of response and involvement; it is a participation in the class struggle to bring about the creation of a new socialist society. This is the kind of praxis which must come **before** reflection and the development of theology. It is the new starting point for hermeneutics. Theology is then placed at the service of this prior commitment to socio-political liberation.

Fear of Abstraction

Liberation Theology says with some justification that traditional theology has been privatised and abstracted from historical realities. To avoid this danger of abstraction, theology must be rooted in the human and therefore in the

political dimensions of life. Christians must realise that they must not and indeed cannot escape politics.

The Role of Ideology

A central feature of the theology of liberation is the conviction that there is no ideologically neutral theology or exegesis. Liberation theologians reject the ideologies of the status quo, and opt for an ideological commitment to the oppressed which for most of them means Marxism.

Basic Flaws in the Theology of Liberation

However much we may learn from Liberation Theology, it is essential if we are to develop a scriptural theology, to enter the following caveats:

Use of Scripture

The Liberation theologians do not give to the Scriptures the primacy and authority which they demand and deserve. The Bible is often used, but more as a book of illustrations than as the sole authority in matters of faith and conduct. It seems that the text is swallowed up by the context and Scripture is not allowed to judge the theology or the Marxist philosophy tied up with it. The 'Christian feminist' and Liberation theologian, Rosemary Reuther, asserts that the text, the Bible, becomes "a document of collective human failure rather than prescriptive norm".¹⁹ The Catholic Church, which for centuries withheld the Bible from its people, now uses the Bible but without inculcating respect for its authority and infallibility.

View of History

The theology of liberation has an optimistic and Marxist philosophy of history. The Marxist has a certain discernment of the future, a faith linked to the inevitable march of history, brought about by 'the revolution', which is of course just around the corner. This can lead to justifying anything since the revolution must succeed. The Sovereignty of God, the Fall, the Cross and the Second Coming of Christ are of little significance in this view of history.

Externalisation of the Gospel

With Liberation Theology we must reject the tendency to privatise and spiritualise sin, and to emphasise the vertical at the expense of the horizontal. This has resulted in church members who are "all too naive about the injustices of the present social order and too comfortable within the womb of the consumer society".²⁰ However, Liberation Theology is in danger of so externalising the Gospel that it seriously neglects the vertical God-ward aspect of salvation. By hitching their wagon to the Marxist train, the liberationists are in danger of repeating Marx's failure:

He failed both to plumb the depths of alienation (as estrangement from God) and to follow the perfect orthopraxis of the Creator's Son. Instead he bequeathed to an unjust world a powerful locomotive of revolutionary activism, but only the most frail of ethical tracks to run it on.²¹

Ideological Captivity

Liberation Theology rightly warns us of the way in which religion can be turned into an ideology of the State. However, Liberation Theology itself has become captive to an anti-Christian ideology. Without disputing the value of a

partnership between theology and sociology, we must reject any supposed neutrality in sociology, least of all Marxist sociology with its Enlightenment view of man. Professor Harvie Conn points out that “Marxism as a tool builds on a metaphysical definition of man as bearing within himself the power to subject to himself the whole of reality and to bring it under his own humanising regime”.²² By this means God is pushed aside, the Bible is prevented from saying anything unsaid by Marxism, and the door is open to a new Pelagianism, that is, man’s advancement by his own efforts.

Liberation Theology’s Challenging Agenda

It would be all too easy to dismiss Liberation Theology and so neglect the challenge of working out a theology which applies the Gospel to every area of life and culture. René Padilla, an evangelical theologian in Argentina, asks: “Is not the radical leftist theology itself, at least in part, a reaction against the deadly reduction of Christian mission that has characterised Latin American Protestantism? In our aloofness from social analysis and interaction on the problems people face is there not what amounts to a de facto fundamentalism of the Right.”²³ The sections that follow are attempts to bring aspects of the Gospel to bear on issues people are facing in Ireland and around the world today. The agenda is wide open.

Liberation and Salvation

One of the most common slogans daubed on the walls of Belfast is “Ireland unfree shall never be at peace”. One of the most violent of the terrorist factions takes the name ‘Irish National Liberation Army’. But what is freedom? What is true liberation? One of the most basic problems with Liberation Theology is its confusion of biblical salvation and political liberation. For example, Gutierrez says that in the “struggle against misery, injustice and exploitation, the goal is the creation of a new man”²⁴ This is both a biblical and a Marxist expression, but with quite different meanings. The “one new man” of which Paul writes is God’s creation by Christ’s death and God’s gift to those who are personally in Christ (Eph. 2:15,16; 2 Cor. 5:17). This cannot be the same as the “creation” through Marxism of a new social order for all men, whether Christian or not. Liberation Theology is essentially committed to universalism. Gutierrez asserts “the universality of the salvific will of God”.²⁵ The message is that God is going to save everyone. By the inevitable processes of history all men are heading for salvation and liberation. Those who jump in the stream (of political action) now will be carried along all the faster by God’s liberating current. Gutierrez says that “man is saved if he opens himself to God and to others, even if he is not clearly aware that he is doing so”.²⁶

This equation of salvation with political liberation is similar to the definition of salvation which prevailed at the WCC Assembly in Bangkok in January 1973 and entitled “Salvation Today”. According to the Assembly report: “salvation is the peace of people in Vietnam, independence in Angola, justice and reconciliation in Northern Ireland ...”²⁷

Gutierrez goes so far as to say that “The God of biblical revelation is known

through interhuman justice. When justice does not exist, God is not known; he is absent.”²⁸ This is a distortion of the biblical doctrine of grace. We can agree that a true knowledge of God must issue in love and justice towards our neighbour, but to put it the other way round “is uncommonly like a doctrine of salvation by good works”.²⁹ Prof. Harvie Conn rightly warns that “Roman Catholic theology, throughout its history, has compromised that *sola fide* message with its ‘grace, plus’ bypass. Within Liberation thinking, is that ‘plus’ not now being reinforced?”³⁰

Liberation Theology’s inadequate doctrine of grace is matched by an inadequate doctrine of sin. Fr. Des Wilson is typical of many in holding an unbiblical view of the goodness of man and viewing all men as “redeemed by Christ”.³¹ Though Liberation Theology is right in showing that sin is more than an individual matter, a merely private or interior reality — that it has corporate, social and structural dimensions — nevertheless its view of sin remains dangerously shallow. As Carl Braaten reminds us:

Sin provokes the wrath of God; it is slavery to Satan; it is a state of spiritual death; it is a disease of the whole person — a sickness unto death. It is a state of corruption so profound that the elimination of poverty, oppression, disease, racism, sexism, classism, capitalism, etc., does not alter the human condition of sinfulness in any fundamental way.³²

Human Rights and the Christian View of Man

The present troubles began with a campaign for civil rights. This gave opportunity to some who were opposed to the very existence of Northern Ireland to begin a campaign of violence. As the Government tried to clamp down ever more severely on the violence, so concern shifted from civil rights to human rights — concern about powers of arrest, internment without trial, the treatment of suspects, allegations of torture, prison conditions, non-jury courts, and the use of paid informers. The result has been more alienation from respect for the rule of law.

Christians have been very slow to get involved in either civil or human rights issues, tending to concentrate their attention on the most wicked atrocities carried out against innocent people by terrorist (IRA) forces. There has been little understanding or sympathy for the sense of grievance widely felt in the nationalist community.

In discussion of rights we need to get back to the basic question of the Psalmist “What is man?” (Ps. 8:4). The Bible teaches that man had a distinctive origin which set him apart from all the rest of God’s creatures (Genesis 1:26-28; 2:7). Man’s nature is also unique: he is made in the image of God, both male and female, made like God and to relate to God as a covenant being, responsible to God (Genesis 1 and 2). When it comes to the implications of this for human rights we can echo the words of the Lausanne Covenant (1974):

Because mankind is made in the image of God, every person regardless of race, religion, colour, culture, class, sex or age, has an intrinsic dignity because of which he should be respected and served, not exploited.³³

These principles should make Christians more willing to contend for the rights of others, especially the under-privileged, the weak, the unborn. The late Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones warns us that “looking at history, it seems to me that one of the greatest dangers confronting the Christian is to become a political conservative, an opponent of legitimate reform, and the legitimate rights of the people.”³⁴

As far as political or democratic rights are concerned it is surely time for Unionists to consider whether the invocation of “majority rule” is the way to do justice to the aspirations of around 40 per cent of the population. On the legal front the use of the uncorroborated evidence of paid informers has been challenged by many. A Reformed Presbyterian writer, Neville Kerr, on the basis of texts such as Numbers 35:30, Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15; Matthew 18:16 and 1 Timothy 5:19, concludes that “the supergrass practice, insofar as it leads to the conviction of men solely on the uncorroborated evidence of a self-confessed criminal is in direct conflict with the principles given to the Children of Israel by God.”³⁵

Revolution and Christology

Our society faces a carefully planned and totally ruthless campaign of violence, sometimes indiscriminate, sometimes directed against so-called ‘legitimate targets’ such as policemen, prison officers, judges and politicians, and sometimes directed against prestige targets in England. The aim is to secure ‘British withdrawal’. However, this is seen as only the first step towards the revolution and the eventual establishment of an All-Ireland Cuban-style socialist republic. As Michael Garde explains:

The Provisional IRA ... see themselves as freedom fighters finishing the work of de-colonisation which was uncompleted at the beginning of the century ... A necessary consequence of the Provisional’s nationalistic religion is the genocide of the Protestant people they are trying to force into a united Ireland.³⁶

One of the sad realities of the Northern Ireland situation is that there has been equivocation on the part of some clergy on the issue of the use of violence in this present conflict. Fr. Des Wilson has clearly shown his sympathy for the IRA’s campaign of terror. He protests about the whole system of government as “institutionalised violence”. He says that the churches routinely condemn violence but he says “the churches have adamantly refused to define what they mean by violence. To them violence is when the poor guy in the street goes and gets a gun and shoots somebody, but violence is not when people are driven into exile, are driven into unemployment, deprived of adequate means of livelihood or deprived of their dignity.”³⁷ But Wilson is ignoring Paul’s teaching in Romans chapter 13. He resorts to the just war theory to try to justify his position, arguing that the revolution has hope of success and that a mandate has been given to the revolutionaries by the oppressed people. However, his own bishop, Cahal Daly, has refuted this argument showing that the ‘war’ is unjust because it lacks the support of the vast majority of Irish people, it treats the Protestants of Northern Ireland as non-people, and it uses methods which are barbaric.³⁸

The theology of liberation has put forward a new approach to Christology which has serious doctrinal and practical effects. Liberation theologians have rejected popular Latin American images of Christ (as either vanquished and helpless or celestial monarch and remote), believing that these images have been manipulated by conservative forces to prevent change in society. Without doubt the repudiation of unbiblical traditions must be repudiated. However, the Liberation theologians have inherited from European theology a scepticism about the possibility of any sure knowledge of the Jesus of history. The result of this scepticism about the sources of Christology is that Liberation theologians are in danger of being among those who “depict Jesus in their own image”.³⁹ As a result they are left with a Jesus who was a mere man who sided with the poor against the Establishment — a revolutionary Christ who is far from the Christ of the Bible, the Christ who is God Incarnate (John 1:14) and God with us (Matt. 1:23), the Christ who told His disciples in the Garden to put away their swords (Matt. 26:52) and who said to Pilate “My Kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight” (John 18:36).

Poverty and the Kingdom of God

One of the most disturbing challenges of Liberation Theology comes when it awakens our conscience to the extent of poverty in the world and also the depth in which this theme is treated in the Scriptures. High unemployment and years of bad housing especially among the Catholic urban population have contributed to a sense of hopelessness and alienation from the State and society in general. This has undoubtedly contributed to the violence in Northern Ireland just as similar disadvantages experienced by the black community in England have contributed to urban riots. This is not to condone or justify what has happened but to try to understand.

Evangelicals have at times been guilty of a middle-class internalisation which avoids the impact of the biblical message. We have spiritualised ‘poverty’ into an interior problem. However, Liberation Theology has gone to the opposite extreme by an externalisation which puts all the emphasis on social alienation, social-class conflict and economic deprivation, viewing all the poor as on God’s side. For Liberation Theology “the movements of the poor can be seen as signs of the Kingdom, as places where God is working in history”.⁴⁰ Herman Ridderbos points the way to a more biblical understanding when he suggests that the poor

“represent the socially oppressed, those who suffer from the power of injustice and are harassed by those who only consider their own advantage and influence. They are, however, at the same time those who remain faithful to God, and expect their salvation from His Kingdom alone”.⁴¹

Jesus made it plain that He expected His followers to identify with the poor and to fulfil their obligations to the poor. This requires us to do more than verbalise our concern for the poor. We need to develop a more simple life-style. We need as individuals and as churches to consider ways of helping to change structures which contribute to poverty. Ministers and many other Christian people must face up to the challenge of remaining in or relocating to the areas of greatest need. As John Perkins points out: “Many of

our neighbourhoods cannot be improved until there are people living there with the skills, the talents, and the resources that can make the difference.”⁴²

Every effort must be made to bridge the gap between the Church and the poorest of society. David Sheppard says that Christians must begin with service to the community and realise that the time for naming the name of Christ “may be ten years down the road, when the neighbours have had the chance to see signs in the life of the Christian community”.⁴³ However, I believe there is a grave danger of substituting social activism for evangelism, and so we will ‘sell people short’. Surely we cannot wait ten years to tell the poor the good news remembering the way Jesus integrated word and deed in His ministry? It was reported of the labours of Christ that: “the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor” (Matthew 11:5).

The Church and its Role in Ireland Today

The Calling of the Church

Each church must ask itself: How far does our church fulfil its calling to be “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world”? For Gutierrez “any claim to non-involvement in politics — a banner recently acquired by conservative sectors — is nothing more than a subterfuge to keep things the way they are”.⁴⁴ One of the greatest needs in Ireland today is for churches who will display the *koinonia* in the New Testament Church, loving one another, serving the world, rejoicing in the power and grace of the Spirit.

Prayer

We are under constant pressure to substitute activity for prayer in our own lives and in the life of the Church. Prayer is the cry of those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (for putting things right) (Matt. 5:6). As we look at the world in its fallenness we are to cry out like widows asking persistently for justice before the “unjust judge” (Luke 18:1-5). We must acknowledge that the task of winning souls to Christ and of gaining victory over the powers of darkness and injustice is too big for us and so we must make prayer our top priority.

Social Responsibility and Evangelism

One of the benefits of the debate with Liberation Theology has been the way in which Evangelicals have re-assessed the relationship between social responsibility and evangelism. Depending on the situation and depending on our gifts and function in the body of Christ, it may be right to concentrate on one or other of these two Christian duties. Although evangelism relates to people’s eternal destiny and the supreme need of all men is the saving grace of Jesus Christ, yet it has been well said that “seldom if ever should we have to choose between satisfying physical hunger and spiritual hunger, or between healing bodies and saving souls, since an authentic love for our neighbour will lead us to serve him or her as a whole person”.⁴⁵ Positively we can agree to the validity of the Grand Rapids Report view that social activity is a consequence of evangelism, a bridge to evangelism and a partner to evangelism. The same report helpfully distinguishes between social service (relieving human need,

works of mercy) and social action (removing the causes of human need, the quest for justice). There is much scope for individual Christians to get involved in both kinds of activity, sometimes combining with other Christians and sometimes getting involved alongside non-Christians as co-belligerents to advance a particular cause. In Northern Ireland the pro-life organisation LIFE has provided a sphere where Protestant and Catholic have come together as concerned citizens working for the common good.

The Churches in Northern Ireland have had a rather narrow social involvement, focusing mainly on issues such as temperance and Sabbath observance. In his recent study on the Gospel and the working classes, Roy Joslin challenges the Church to widen its concern and to become “a friend to the lonely” (widows and orphans, senior citizens, the single-parent family), “a defender of the powerless” (poverty, race, discrimination) and “a champion of the oppressed” (unemployment, fair wages, and human working conditions).⁴⁶ Although the title *deacon* may not have been applied until later, Acts 6 supplies us with a model for diaconal ministry which could be applied today to the administration of many church-based ministries to the needy. Johannes H. Verkuyl in a very thought-provoking study of the role of the diaconate lists some specific projects: “freeing people from addictions, advancing meaningful community, bridging the gap between conflicting groups, struggling against unemployment, and serving justice”.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Liberation Theology uncovers the urgent need for Irish Evangelicals to do more listening, to see ourselves as others see us. Then with a deepened understanding of the Scriptures and a renewed appreciation of our own Reformation heritage, we must begin to put aside the siege mentality and reach out across the barriers of alienation. We must communicate Christ by word and deed in ways which will not be misunderstood. In view of our responsibility to imitate the incarnation (Phil. 2:5ff) we must face up to the challenge of renunciation of status and pride, of independence and of immunity from trouble. The Ulster Christian should be more concerned for the rights and interests of others than his own. Professor Fred S. Leahy, a Reformed Presbyterian minister in Northern Ireland, challenges the Protestant majority to “recognise the distinction between their legal, democratic right on the one hand and their Christian obligation on the other”.⁴⁸ While his suggestion of a federal solution to Ireland’s problems may be far beyond the realm of practical politics, there are ways in which this spirit of reconciliation and self-sacrifice could be shown in Northern Ireland. It is no compromise of our Reformation heritage to admit that Protestants have been guilty of prejudice, discrimination and violence against Roman Catholics. Fears about the long-term future of Northern Ireland should no longer be fostered and exploited in order to excuse the failure of the unionist community to give the nationalist community a generous share in governing Northern Ireland. It is time to confess with Dr. Clifford Smyth that Protestants have “added fuel to the tinder of frustrated nationalism by their complacent disregard of the aspirations of the Roman Catholic minority in the North, and their neglect of the spiritual needs of Ireland as a whole”.⁴⁹

We must confess that we as Evangelicals have been guilty of “a spirituality without discipleship in the daily social, economic and political aspects of life”⁵⁰ and that “very often our quest for doctrinal truth has not been balanced with a desire for the grace which characterised the Master we seek to follow”.⁵¹

The task before the Church in Ulster today is urgent and daunting. And yet there are encouragements to be found. On many occasions the patience and prayers of God’s people have held us back from a Lebanon-type conflict. Ulster continues to be one of the most privileged countries in the world in terms of the strength of the cause of Christ and Ulster has been blessed with remarkable times of revival in the past. The Christians of Ulster would do well to ponder the considered opinion of Charles Finney that “revivals are hindered when ministers and churches take wrong ground in regard to any question involving human rights”.⁵² And yet in God’s mercy the number of evangelical preachers has been increasing over the past fifteen years.

I am convinced that genuine hope for Ulster and Ireland today is not to be found in a Liberation Theology which is ideologically captive to revolutionary Republicanism, nor in a narrow Fundamentalism which has married the Gospel to Ulster unionism, but in a biblical Calvinism which calls all men to repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ and asserts that all of society and all of culture must submit to the claims and authority of Jesus Christ.

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