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Justification by Grace and Liberation Theology: A Comparison¹

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The Rise of Liberation Theology

If evangelical preaching is really to be good news for the poor (cf. Matthew 11:5; Luke 4:18), what must its message be? This question cannot be avoided in Latin America. Some 80 percent of the population is living at subsistence level or below—in a continent with a superfluity of natural resources. An unparalleled process of impoverishment, clearly not yet at an end, has resulted from foreign debt and economic dependence and likewise from grossly unjust distribution of income, concentration of the land in the hands of a few, and economic mismanagement. There has consequently been a dramatic increase in violence, an enormous amount of internal migration, high infant mortality, child-exposure, and unemployment—in short, hunger, poverty and death. What do salvation, the gospel and the Christian mission mean in such circumstances?

At the very least since the Episcopal Conference at Medellín, Colombia, in 1968, it was clear to large groups in Catholicism (and meanwhile in Protestantism as well) that, in the face of the distress in Latin America, it is the church's task to campaign for the liberation of the oppressed. The gospel is not neutral. God takes the side of the poor, liberates from all distress. The theology of liberation developed on this basis is a contextual theology profoundly conscious of its responsibility to deal with the realities of the situation. It sees itself as "reflection on praxis in the light of the gospel". At its heart is the discovery that poverty, ignorance and oppression have structural causes and must therefore be dealt with effectively at the political level.

What is needed, therefore, is that the people should become aware of their situation and claim their rights. What the gospel seeks is justice, an end to tyranny, and human freedom; its goal is the establishment of the kingdom of God. The emphasis of liberation theology, therefore, is on praxis, and the need for solidarity with the oppressed in their struggle for liberation. The gospel commits us to the "option in favour of the poor". At the same time liberation theology denounces the "ideologies" which conceal the maintenance of class privileges. The results are visible in those thousands of basic or grassroots communities in which a profound spirituality is combined with social and political commitment.

Although liberation theology quite deliberately accepts the political dimension of the Christian faith, it has in mind something more than social action. The gospel liberates the *whole* human being; it sets people free not only from unjust structures but also from the power of sin, human egotism and the tyranny of death. It is for this reason, if for no other, that Bible reading, prayer, and the credal confession of faith are of such importance in the grassroots groups. In other words, the poor and the oppressed are offered a gospel which is more than comfort and healing for the soul, but is also more than mere social improvement. This gospel is the promise of a real change in the situation, a new deliverance from Egypt, a new exodus.

Clearly the response to liberation theology among those who defend the *status quo* is not exactly one of sympathy. It is a matter of controversy even in the Catholic Church itself. It attacks the interests and privileges of the dominant classes and raises critical questions within the churches, challenging not least the Protestant churches, their theology and their congregational life. In our reactions we should guard against cheap polemics. Any answer which ignores the reality of poverty and injustice is wide off the mark. But we do have to ask about the meaning of justification by grace through faith—the main article in the Reformation churches—in the Latin American situation.

The Meaning of Justification by Faith

To preach justification is to bear witness to the mercy of God in accepting sinners, pardoning their guilt and restoring

to them the dignity of the children of God. This is what the term "the righteousness (justice) of God" (Romans 1:17; 3:21; *et frequenter*) signifies: not the justice by which God avenges sin through punishment, but the righteousness God bestows on human beings by justifying them and taking them back into fellowship with God. God is just in God's justification of sinners (Romans 3:26) and is so, moreover, through Jesus Christ the Crucified, the sign and proof of God's love towards the fallen world.

It is a mistake to imagine that the message of justification rests exclusively on the testimony of Paul. Even though the corresponding terminology is largely missing in the gospel accounts, Jesus' words and deeds were wholly bent on the justification of the sinner. He is the mediator of God's unmerited grace, as his fellowship with tax collectors and sinners shows. One of the most impressive presentations of justification through grace alone is the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11ff.). The kingdom of God, the nearness of which is proclaimed by Jesus (Mark 1:15), is itself nothing other than the justification of the sinner and the restoration of humanity to subjection to the exclusive sovereignty of God. Justification, then, is God's active love, bestowing aid without questions as to worthiness and merit. It puts in a claim for the right to be gracious (Matthew 20:1f.), and to be merciful even when the whole world condemns (Luke 19:1ff.). The truth is that in the presence of God nothing can be taken by force. What God gives is given out of pure grace; life, its blessings, forgiveness, help, everything. In "return" God expects simply our thankful acceptance of the divine gifts, our respect for God's rights as Creator, our trust not in our own human capacities but in God's strength which is demonstrated mightily in our weakness.

What comes into being as a result of justification, therefore, is a new humanity, which can thank and praise God and trust in God more than in all else. The result of justification is the church, the assembly of redeemed sinners, the body of Christ. The result of justification is, finally, the obligation to live a new life in the combat with sin, in love to the neighbour, and in the constant attempt to practise the service of God in this world—until the day when faith is permitted to see, no longer in a mirror darkly, but "face to face" (1 Corinthians 12:12), at

the resurrection of the dead and the coming of God's kingdom in all its power and glory.

On the basis of what has been said above, we might be tempted to conclude that whereas justification by grace through faith is good news for sinners, the message of liberation is the true gospel for the poor. Martin Luther asked: How do I (as a sinner) find a gracious God? Liberation theology asks: How do we (the poor) find a just world? In both instances we can appeal to the witness of the Bible.

In the case of Jesus we find side by side the blessing pronounced on the poor and the search for the lost. The parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus, which speaks of the deliverance of the poor man, stands alongside the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, the theme of which is the deliverance of the sinner (Luke 16:19ff.; 18:9ff.).

Liberation and Justification: How They Are Related

What then is the relationship in the gospel between sin and poverty, justification and liberation, God's grace and humanity's task?

1. I find it impossible to speak of liberation theology without thinking at the same time of what we can learn from it. A sheer confrontation between two rigid positions is hardly likely to be very fruitful. Moreover, in the theology of liberation and the theology of justification we are dealing with extremely complex phenomena which appear in widely different forms and cut right across all the traditional confessional boundaries. All that can be compared, therefore, are a few broad salient features and tendencies.

2. It is to liberation theology's credit that it reminds us that justice is what God requires of us; justice, moreover, in the quite basic sense of the recognition and securing of another's rights, as the sharing and fair distribution of material and other blessings. In this sense, justice is both a political concept and yet at the same time a profoundly biblical concept. The Old Testament prophets called for justice in the form of the championing of the cause of the weak and the poor, the widows and orphans, the defence of their rights. Jesus promises that those who hunger and thirst for justice shall be satisfied (Matthew 5:6). Finally, justice will be the characteristic of the new heaven and the new earth to which the

Christian looks forward in the coming consummation (2 Peter 3:13). What therefore is the connection between justification and the struggle for justice in this world? Two observations are called for here:

a) Justification does not deprive a human being of what is his or her due. On the contrary it gives him or her what he or she does not deserve (cf. Matthew 20:1ff.). God's grace always gives more than what we are entitled to, never less. In other words, the legitimate rights of the human being are never ignored in justification. On the contrary, it is the basis of the need to protect and respect those rights.

b) Justification carries with it an obligation. It requires to be accepted in faith and to be demonstrated in the practice of that same mercy which the justified person has experienced at the hand of God (cf. Matthew 18:23ff.). Mercy and love will, of course, always be more than mere distributive justice, but, as already said, never less than that. Love takes no delight in injustice. It wants to see that which God has given freely to all beings respected as a right.

According to the biblical witness, *freedom* is the outcome of justification. So it is not by chance that the Reformation of the sixteenth century was a great liberation movement. Has this aspect of the gospel been lost? This is where liberation theology puts its question: when the church speaks of evangelical freedom, can it ignore structures which enslave human beings and oppress them politically, economically and culturally? Liberation theology notes that sin is not something concerning only the individual but also leaves its traces in laws and structures which are incompatible with the gospel. Evangelical freedom, liberation theology insists, must be concrete, and that means, not least, political, just as salvation as such must be concrete and include the physical, material needs of the human being.

Thus the Protestant church is challenged to abandon a narrow individualistic view of justification and to rediscover the social implications of the gospel. Justification by grace becomes excitingly relevant when we discover that the law from which it liberates us embraces also the social structures which determine our lives.

3. Lutheran tradition has never denied the political task of the Christian. In social structures and in the authority of

the state it has recognized the beneficent ordinances for the maintenance of creation. In its concern for the commonweal the state fulfills a divine mandate in which the Christian can do no other than recognize a form of God's gracious rule. The civil power can of course be corrupt and promote injustice rather than justice, and where this happens the Lutheran tradition has clearly said that we must obey God rather than human ordinances (Acts 5:29; cf. Augsburg Confession 16).

Among the Protestants (including the Lutherans) of Latin America, however, we find in fact a curious reticence in political matters. To be sure, there must be no confusion between politics and religion. They are not one and the same thing. On the other hand, neither must there be any divorce between them. Unconditional submission to the established civil authorities at any given time directly contradicts the priority of obedience to God over against all forms of obedience to rulers. The renunciation of political responsibility also hampers the fulfilment of the commandment to love the neighbour and signifies culpable indifference to the preservation of God's creation. The kind of faith which evades political responsibility thereby denies God the Creator, withholds love from the neighbour, and from the state that cooperation which it needs even if it would prefer to do without it. The modern state cannot function without the active cooperation of its citizens. Liberation theology reminds the church of this task.

4. The gospel demands faith, not an effort to obtain salvation through works of merit. But does this mean that Christians can fold their arms and consider themselves dispensed from all activity? Pushing it a bit, one could say that in our churches a real allergy has developed to all that could even remotely smack of "works". As already shown, this is a crude misunderstanding of justification, one which the apostle Paul attacked in Romans 7.

By its strict emphasis on praxis, liberation theology exposes a long-standing deficiency in our churches. Faith is not limited to emotion, knowledge or conviction. Faith means life. It works by love (Galatians 5:6). The grace received from God is to be passed on and lived out. And this means, too, that Christians recognize that it is necessary for them to oppose lovelessness in our society, to protest against the crimes inflicted on God's

creation and against the injustice done to the poor and defenceless. They have an obligation to identify and condemn sin and to champion the victims of society. What is required of those who have been justified by grace and faith is not the works of the law but certainly the works of love.

Liberation theology emphatically reminds the churches of the realities of Latin America and of neglected aspects of Christian practice. As a theological movement it is to be taken very seriously, not least in those respects which prompt critical questions from our side, in the light of our Protestant tradition.

An Evangelical Critique of Liberation

1. In the first place, we must look again at the relationship between the gospel and politics. Whereas in the traditionalist churches the political dimension of the Christian faith is either underdeveloped or completely left out of account, in liberation theology it is assigned a priority which in some cases borders on exclusivity. Evil is seen as a product of structures. In particular, evil has taken shape in the capitalist system and demonstrates its reality in a society dominated by conflicting interests and the class struggle. Evil, in other words, is felt to be essentially a political problem which is also to be dealt with politically, i.e., by a strategy, consciousness-raising and the organization of the people. Liberation thus becomes a programme which is to be implemented by the oppressed classes, the goal of which is the elimination of every form of external tyranny and the creation of a just and worthy human society.

Our question is whether the definition of evil mainly in political terms does not deprive evil of its real sting. If such social evils as exploitation and oppression were only structural and political in character, they would in fact be a merely technical matter which could in principle be removed by human efforts. The structural aspects of evil are, clearly, incontestable and must be tackled with energy, but it must be asked whether in liberation theology enough attention is paid to the character of evil as a power. Is not evil overcome solely by the Spirit of God?

If it is dangerous for the one side to deny the political dimension of faith, it is also dangerous for the other side to exaggerate its importance. For when everything is made to depend

on political action, God in the last analysis becomes redundant. Preaching will then consist wholly of imperatives, accusations or attacks, and there is a danger of a frustration arising from experience of human limitations which are also inherent in political endeavour.

Certainly the forms of liberation theology to which reference is made here are of an extremist kind. But they are very much alive in our midst and themselves also pose the question of defining the true relationship between politics and the gospel.

Political action in our view has its place in Christian ethics, not in soteriology. Political action in favour of justice and the commonweal is indeed one of the urgent tasks assigned to Christians. By it the world can be improved, human life can be saved and destruction can be prevented. Yet salvation is not to be procured in this way, since human action never gets beyond the effort to appropriate for ourselves the salvation which is already available in Christ. Though inextricably interconnected, human salvation and human wellbeing are to be distinguished. Salvation without wellbeing is assuredly diminished and scarcely even imaginable. Nevertheless prosperity is very far indeed from having the sense of salvation.

2. How then are we to envisage the relation between gospel and liberation? The majority of liberation theologians are by no means prisoners of the political perspective. As we have already pointed out, what they have in view is complete liberation, including victory over selfishness and lovelessness, unbelief and death. Yet if that be so, does not liberation presuppose justification by grace through faith? How else are we delivered from selfishness than through the forgiveness of God and the gift of the Holy Spirit who renews us wholly and teaches us to seek what is of God and not what is of human origin (cf. Mark 8:33)?

This is why preaching and conversion for all are necessary. Freedom is not simply to be won by struggle, it has to be bestowed on human beings. For evangelical freedom is in essence not only "freedom from", i.e., emancipation and independence. It is fundamentally "freedom for", i.e., readiness and capacity to accept obligations in relation to God and our fellow human beings. But this freedom results only from the preaching and the acceptance of the love of God which welcomes the sinner, does not decide on merit, and is stronger than death.

Without justification through grace accepted in faith, therefore, we shall certainly be able to offer the poor our political programmes (and this is in no way to be disdained) but *not* full and complete liberation.

3. The third question concerns the relation between the gospel and the church. Liberation theology uses the term "people" frequently and as a key concept. It defines it in two ways. "People" means firstly the mass of the marginalized, the exploited and the poor. Here, therefore, it is a sociological category. At the same time, however, "people" is a synonym for church. It is that part of society with which God has entered into solidarity and which therefore is the bearer of the promise. Seen in this way, "people" is a theological term. Although a few liberation theologians make it very clear that faith is also required of the poor, church and people are usually equated even if this equation is mostly implicit rather than explicit. This makes it possible for liberation theology to transfer in practice all the attributes of the church to the people. The people is the church and solidarity with the poor is evidence of belonging to the church.

Difficulties arise here for a Protestant church, both practically and theologically. To take the practical difficulties first. Despite differences of social origin and background among our church members, there is a predominance of middle-class people. In other words, our church is not "people" in the sense indicated above, at any rate the majority of them. In the judgment of pastors who sympathize with liberation theology, we therefore have spurious membership. There is a readiness to work with the people but not with the traditional church member. The conflict which erupts here in our church takes the form of the supposed choice between the so-called "service ministry" and the "ministry of solidarity", i.e., a pastoral office which lives in a direct identification with the people. No solution to this problem is yet on the horizon.

If the practical difficulties are serious, the theological ones are no less so. An evangelical church interprets itself more in terms of what it receives than in terms of what it has or is. It lives by the grace of God, renewed each day. Its primary emphasis is not on the "Christ *with* us", i.e., the Christ who stands beside us, but in the "Christ *for* us", i.e., the Christ who sacrificed himself for us. The church depends on the Word

and sacraments of its Lord. It depends constantly on the grace which is truly received only where we submit ourselves to God's judgment. For Christ the Crucified does not save, does not identify himself in solidarity with anyone, without at the same time judging. There is a fundamental solidarity of all in sin. This solidarity is the basis on which the undeserved grace of God builds the community as a fellowship of graced sinners. All liberation must pass by way of the judgment of the cross of Christ.

One of the consequences of this is the merely relative character of the differentiation between the oppressed and the oppressors. There is a sense in which this differentiation is justified. There *are* oppressors; they exist internationally as well as at the national or personal levels. Yet this differentiation must never be taken to mean the classification of human beings into sinners and righteous. All would be lost in that case. The church would then form a special class, a political party, or a pressure group. It is the offence of the gospel that Jesus Christ radically takes up the cause of sinners and then the poor among these.

In other words, God creates God's community out of unworthy and sinful human beings, not out of those who constitute one and the same social class. All, however, are at once placed in the service of the weak and the needy. It is faith which constitutes the church, the faith which accepts the free justification of the sinner in Christ and insists on this truth. But one of the most fundamental forms in which this faith will find expression is the love which passes on the grace received and introduces it as a critical factor into a world to which grace is unknown and which has succumbed in a terrifying degree to the "law of works", to the law of merit, the law of productivity and profitability. The task of the church is to practise a new fellowship, a fellowship of the unequal yet equal, constantly seeking to overcome the antagonisms of society. This is certainly no easy task. Yet it alone offers the possibility of really being a Christian community.

The Gospel for Latin America

What is the gospel message for Latin America? There is only one message, the message of the God who "so loved the

world that he gave his only begotten Son" (John 3:16). Love is the only thing that can provide the basis for deliverance and hope—even in Latin America. Let me try to explain why.

1. In God's love, i.e., in grace, is the salvation of the world for the two following reasons:

a) God's justifying grace confers on human beings the right to exist, even though they seem redundant and have no "works" (achievements) to which they can point. All for whom society has no room remain God's creatures for whom Christ died on the cross. None of us is forgotten by God. In God's sight a human being does not become worthless when he or she passes life's halfway mark, or is a customer without purchasing power. All are God's children—the orphan and the criminal, the frustrated person in the lap of luxury and the person starving in penury. They may perhaps not know it; they may have "forgotten" it. At all events, this is the truth the church has to broadcast to the four winds as comfort, as a call to repentance, as judgment.

b) God's justifying grace establishes new criteria of conduct. What counts in God's sight is not importance, glory and fame but love towards those who suffer. Love here is not to be understood in any sentimental sense. Christian love is more a matter of will than of emotion. What matters is what we purpose. So the gospel puts to us the question: what is it that love wants for Latin America? Can there be any doubt about the answer? Surely what love wants for Latin America is that it should, that it must, strive for justice, for the changing of structures, for liberation from the yoke of dependencies, and for bread instead of armaments. Love must be a thinking love, and political and economic reflection must be guided by love; otherwise it is utterly vain (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:1ff.).

The gospel of the justification of the sinner liberates us for this love. It does not present this love merely as a demand but actually makes this love possible. The task of the church, therefore, is not just to preach love as God's commandment. By its words and deeds, the church must make men and women capable of love without which the world can only perish.

2. In God's love, i.e., in God's grace, the hope for the world is also rooted and grounded, for:

a) The love of our heavenly Father still remains real even if the world were to be the victim of nuclear or ecological dis-

aster. It remains real, too, for the millions who die of starvation or terrible diseases, or who are the victims of violence. For death cannot separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:30ff.). Hope remains even if the world perishes because of its own crimes, its own lunacies, or even its own creaturely limitations. It is hope of the resurrection. It opens up a future even when, humanly speaking, there is no longer any future.

Faith thereby challenges, not least, that strange "immanentism" which limits reality to what is demonstrable and which must therefore accept death as the final authority and make this life the only possible setting for the fulfilment of all human longings. The inevitable result is a religion of "self-realization", the ruthless pursuit of happiness at the expense of others, an attitude of complete irresponsibility for any future consequences (*après nous le déluge*) which in turn produces a consumer mentality directly responsible for exploitation and social inequality, for the concentration of property in the hands of a few and for an unprecedented plundering of natural resources. Our world is perishing because it does not believe in the resurrection of the dead and no longer has any hope. It is in desperate need of the message of Easter.

b) The love of God in Jesus Christ signifies hope not least because it is ever reawakening us human beings, opening our eyes and ears to the presence of the poor and needy and suffering. Who will venture to speak up in defence of the exploited? Who is free enough and bold enough to attack publicly the crimes being committed against nature, against nations, against social groups and minorities? Only those who are capable of love. But the gospel confers this capacity. A loveless existence is un-Christian. It is the gospel, therefore, which constrains us to ask (I repeat the question): what is it that love must purpose and achieve in Latin America?

Notes

- ¹ "Justification by Grace and Liberation Theology: A Comparison" by Gottfried Brakemeier was originally published in *The Ecumenical Review*, Volume 1, Number 2, April 1988, pp. 215-222. The article has been translated from German by the WCC Language Service. Permission to reprint this article has been granted by WCC Publications, World Council of Churches, Geneva, Switzerland.