10-1-2009

Book Review of Miguel A. De La Torre Liberating Jonah: Forming an Ethic of Reconciliation

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Origen in Menno's call for biblical readings assuming a full-orbed practical understanding of justification.[6]

[1] The complete text of the joint declaration is available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html. See also Trevin Wax, compiler, "The Justification Debate: A Primer," in *Christianity Today* 53:6 (June 2009), 34-35; N.T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 246-52.
[2] Sjouke Voolstra, "Free and Perfect: Justification and Sanctification in Anabaptist Perspective," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 5.3 (Fall 1987): 225.
[3] Gerald J. Mast and J. Denny Weaver, *Defenseless Christianity: Anabaptism for a Nonviolent Church* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2009), 45-46.
[4] Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols., Thomas P. Scheck, trans. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001-2002).
[5] Menno Simons, "Christian Baptism," in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* [CWMS](Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 279.
[6] Menno, "True Christian Faith," in CWMS, 333.

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Miguel A. De La Torre. *Liberating Jonah: Forming an Ethic of Reconciliation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007.

Miguel A. De La Torre, who is on the faculty of Iliff School of Theology in Denver, has written a challenging, provocative volume based on a reading of the book of Jonah and includes an engaging, brief contemporary social analysis in order to place this reading in the modern context.

De La Torre was once asked if any reading of Jonah considers Jonah's message from the perspective of "the margins of society" (ix). His work attempts to respond to his observation that he knew of no such work. In the introduction, he lays out one of his primary arguments: Jonah is a book about reconciliation. His reading presents this as reconciliation in a context of unequal distribution of power – as exemplified by the Israelite, Jonah,

facing Nineveh, symbolic of the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires that were ancient bitter, oppressive enemies. The author is well aware of the potential for manipulating themes of "reconciliation" as a way for the powerful to try to get the oppressed to resign themselves to their subordinated fate.

"It is important to recognize that those who benefit from the present power structures cannot be relied upon to define reconciliation," says the author, "or to determine how to go about achieving it" (2). He advocates no cheap "peace" that does not engage injustice: "A desire to 'forgive and forget' can bring about only a cheap reconciliation that sacrifices justice for the sake of serenity" (5).

In a sense, De La Torre wants to read Jonah from "Jonah's perspective" confronting Assyria, that of a subordinate confronting the powerful. In chapter one, after briefly discussing Assyrian brutality in the Ancient Near East, he begins his read through the book. His analysis is largely literary, drawing only occasionally from contemporary historical-critical commentary. One main source is Rabbinic legends about aspects of Jonah.

In chapter two, "Who was Jonah, What was Nineveh?" De La Torre reads Jonah and Nineveh as models of the oppressed and the socio-economic realities of that oppression in the 18th to 20th centuries of the European and American West. Characteristically, his strongest focus is on the racialized borders of modern socio-economic systems within the US historical context. He is rather dismissive of attempts to work "within the system," because the system itself must be transformed. What it is to be transformed into is not so clear, short of frequent calls for a "redistribution of income."

Chapter three, "Reflecting on Jonah," brings together the author's profound interest in reconciliation as a Christian reality with the difficult "praxis" of justice – reconciliation never cancels the need for change, in his reading. Chapter four, "Praying through Jonah," clarifies that reconciliation must be initiated only by the oppressed: "Those who presently benefit from the existing social order lack the objectivity and moral authority to define reconciliation or even recognize the need for reconciliation…." (88). The author seems to accept nothing short of revolutionary change for authentic reconciliation. This becomes problematic when he tends to minimize the courageous acts of individuals because they do not transform entire socio-economic systems. This sense of helplessness in the face of evil systems sets

up his sense of hopelessness in the final chapter.

Chapter five, "Pitfalls Jonah Should Avoid," includes comments about internal politics in various ethnic and cultural minorities, as well as problems in dealing with Euro-Americans, who are largely not trusted for a credible analysis because "Euroamerican Christians, either from the fundamentalist right or the far liberal left, probably have more in common with each other and understand each other better than they do Christians on the other side of the racial and ethnic divide" (125). So great is the task of social transformation and so little the will to do it that De La Torre despairs of its ever taking place even in his grandchildren's generation (143).

In the final chapter, "Case Studies," the author offers stories of attempts by individuals to seek social change and raises questions about each case. For example, the first case describes recent Native-American reactions to the Columbus Day celebrations in Denver, and asks the reader to consider what forms of protest or response would have been appropriate, given that Native groups were denied most opportunities for legal, peaceful protest. A second case describes Daryl Davis, an African-American, who attempted to make contact with members of the Ku Klux Klan in order to force a dialogue on racism. He even managed to make friends, leading some members to leave the Klan after long conversations with him. These and other cases are intended to raise questions about the individual actions of people of color, but one is left wondering if these studies are signs of hope or of futility, given De La Torre's previous analysis.

Reading as a Quaker informed by Anabaptist theology, I honor individual acts of faith – attempts to live an alternative reality within the rigid systems of oppression – and that same Anabaptist conscience sometimes wonders if this is the best to be hoped for. I will not minimize or trivialize such individual actions only because they fall short of the revolution. Further, I am not in sympathy with an exclusively racialized social analysis that refuses to consider the potential bridge-building (and recognition of historical realities) that are served by a more thorough-going class analysis. Finally, I am concerned with De La Torre's tendencies to homogenize the very different experiences of Latino, Asian, Native, and African-Americans. "People of color" is becoming a dubious generalization for social analysis.

My disagreements notwithstanding, I deeply appreciate De La Torre's

fascinating meditations on the socio-economic contexts of a modern reading of Jonah.

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Ted Lewis, ed. *Electing Not to Vote: Christian Reflections on Reasons for Not Voting.* Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008.

This volume takes up an interesting and important question: Might Christians faithfully abstain from voting? This is a provocative question in a culture which assumes that voting is a civic responsibility, even (perhaps especially) for Christians. As the essays collected here demonstrate, it is a question that should be asked and discussed carefully in our faith communities.

The essays are uniform in their affirmation that it is possible, and sometimes desirable, for Christians to abstain from voting. The nine contributors make the case for abstention from voting in a variety of ways from a rich array of Christian perspectives.

Indeed, one of the book's most interesting features is the breadth of ecclesial perspectives represented. Authors come from Mennonite, Pentecostal, Catholic, Baptist, and intentional Christian community traditions, and they write from, and sometimes to, those communities. Central to the conversation is how our identity as Christians is shaped by our political participation and how we are to understand the dual nature of our citizenship.

The authors offer a wide range of critiques of voting. Some reflect personally on their experiences of voting and participating in electoral politics, and suggest that the process damages their Christian discipleship. For instance, Michael Degan rejects voting in part "because of who I become in order to win" (61). Others share a concern about how the polarized politics of American presidential elections have affected conversations in our churches. John D. Roth's well-known essay, which begins the collection, is the best example of this concern. Others offer critiques of the candidates we