

The Bible, the Church, and the Poor

(1 of 3)

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I have been asked to discuss the subject, "The Bible, the church, and the poor." It is a very interesting subject, and one which has come to the foreground in recent decades. It is, however, a subject which merits clarification, for part of what has happened in those decades is that we have learned to read the Bible in a different way.

If I had been given this subject thirty years ago, when I began teaching, I would have dealt with it very differently than I would now. This difference has to do, not only with content, but also and even more so with methodology.

Allow me to explain. Thirty years ago, if confronted with the theme, "the Bible, the church, and the poor," I would have understood that to mean simply, what does the Bible say about the church and the poor? And, to answer the question, I would have thought that it would suffice for me to read the Bible itself, perhaps with the help of a few scholarly books on the subject.

Today the situation is quite different. What has happened in the last decades is that we have become acutely aware that what one finds in the Bible depends to a degree on one's perspective, from which one reads the Bible. Thus, the question becomes more complicated. It

is no longer simply, what does the Bible say about the poor? It is also and foremost, what does the Bible say when read from the perspective of the poor? Or, in other words, what do the poor find in the Bible that the non-poor easily miss?

All of us know why this shift in the meaning of the question: One of the most remarkable phenomena in the field of theology in recent decades has been the radical democratization of theology. It used to be that theology was a discipline pursued by a few highly trained scholars, mostly male, mostly white, and mostly in the North Atlantic, usually within an academic setting. Its typical geographical context was the classroom and the library. Its typical audience: other theologians, students aspiring to be theologians, and a few pastors.

In the earlier years of the century, a great cry was heard against that kind of theology. At the time, the point was that theology properly belongs in the context of the church. Karl Barth, who had begun what he intended to be his major systematic work under the title of *Christian Dogmatics*, decided that this was a false start, and that he had to begin anew. Significantly, the title of his new work was *Church Dogmatics* --or, in a more literal translation, "Churchly Dogmatics." There were many reasons why Barth thought that his earlier attempt at a systematic theology was flawed, but one of them was that it did not sufficiently take into account the ecclesiastical context of theology. What he meant was that theology was to be done **by** the church, and in the context of the church and its proclamation. True, Barth

continued being an academic theologian and a university professor throughout his life, yet his intent was to develop a theology dealing with the proclamation of the church.

When I began teaching theology, that, too, was my concern. It still is one of my concerns. How do we teach theology in such a way that it really serves the ministry of the church? In very concrete and practical terms, how do we teach theology in such a manner that seminarians leave our institutions properly equipped for the work of the ordained ministry? Obviously, that is a question both of content and of pedagogy, for it has to do both with what we teach and with how we teach it; with what the curriculum includes, and with how the various elements in the curriculum relate to each other.

As I have just said, this is still one of my crucial concerns. It is a concern that has grown as I have become more involved in, and more aware of, the issues related to the theological education of ethnic minorities. A few years ago, I did a study titled "The Theological Education of Hispanics" for The Fund for Theological Education. Questionnaires were sent out, and I also interviewed a vast number of Hispanic pastors. Their most common comments about their theological education? "My seminary experience was generally pleasant, but when I went out to the church, I found that what I had learned was so enmeshed in the white, middle-class, English-speaking context that it was hardly applicable in the context of the Hispanic church. I had to learn many things all over again." Therefore, the question of the relationship between

theology --more specifically, between theological education-- and the church is still of primary importance.

That, however, is no longer the question that seems to occupy the foreground -at least for me. To me, the most important development in the field of theology in the present century is what I would call the "democratization" of theology. What I mean by this is that theology is no longer exclusively, nor even primarily, the preserve of white, male, North-Atlantic, highly trained scholars in schools of theology. Schools of theology still play an important role. White, male, North-Atlantic theologians are still a fundamental part of the picture. I do not mean to belittle either the schools themselves, or those who have traditionally been the most significant part of their faculty and student body.

Yet, the most exciting theological developments today are not taking place in libraries nor in university classrooms. The most astonishing discoveries regarding the Bible are not taking place in archaeological digs. The most exciting theological developments and the most astonishing biblical discoveries are taking place in thousands upon thousands of places where Christians of all walks of life, but mostly poor, gather to study the Bible. They are taking place in a laborer's one-room apartment in Korea, in a hut in the Philippines, under a tree somewhere in Central America, in a small village square in Africa, in a women's dormitory on a college campus, in a Hispanic Bible study group in East L.A. In all these places, Christians are rediscovering the Bible. They are gaining from it, insights for daily life; for a daily life that is

very different than they have been told. As they read Scripture, they discover in passage after passage meanings that are clearly there, once they point them out, but which are not usually reflected in academic commentaries or in traditional lectures on the Bible in seminaries.

The discoveries that are being made in all these places are too numerous to list. Passage upon passage gains new meaning. It will probably be decades or even longer before we are able to even begin grasping all that is being said about countless scriptural passages. But one thing is clear: What is being discovered is that the Bible really belongs to the people. What the Reformation of the sixteenth century affirmed, the great Reformation of the twentieth is putting into practice. That is what I mean by the "democratization" of theology. Or, if you wish to put it in more clearly biblical terms, what is happening is that we are beginning to learn that it is indeed true that God has hidden certain things from the wise and the learned and revealed them to babes!

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So today, when we speak of "the Bible, the church, and the poor," the question is no longer simply, what can we discover in the Bible about the proper attitude of the church to the poor? The question is rather, what do the poor find in the Bible that is an important message to the entire church?

This does not mean that those of us who have been trained with the traditional tools of biblical scholarship no longer have a function. On the contrary, we are living at a time when

biblical scholarship is becoming increasingly exciting, as it takes upon itself the task of relating the discoveries that people are making in the Bible with what our linguistic, historical, archaeological, and other studies tell us. To bring this matter to its simplest level: There is still a value in knowing the biblical languages and in knowing what was a pharisee and what a sadducee. With such knowledge, we can inform and perhaps at times even correct some of the interpretations that may come from the grass roots. But we must also, in all honesty, take those interpretations seriously, acknowledging that traditional biblical scholarship is not a purely objective science but also reflects the interests and prejudices of the particular groups that scholars have represented.

One of those scholars, Norman K. Gottwald, has expressed such interests and prejudices as follows:

Biblical scholars from the Renaissance to the bourgeois revolutions of the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries were generally the intellectual adjuncts of monarchic, aristocratic, or clerical class interests. Increasingly in the nineteenth century, they became one functional group among many academicians and intellectuals who shared in the bourgeois revolutions against monarchical and aristocratic domination. A broadly bourgeois democratic political and cultural perspective shaped their outlook, although the specifically democratic component was very late in developing in Germany. By and large the position of biblical scholars, as a professional and intellectual elite, was oppositional both toward the declining monarchies and aristocracies and toward the rising underclasses of the industrial proletariat and, later, the peasantry. In contrast to the formerly dominant classes, they were liberative and progressive, but toward the classes below them they were conservative and reactionary. An informed guess is that the greater proportion of biblical scholars was drawn from clerical or artisan circles, or from the families of government officials and bureaucrats, i.e., from groups shaped by a petty bourgeois outlook.¹

His conclusion is that:

biblical scholars of the last two centuries have been firmly located in the middle class and have synthesized their scholarly humanistic ideals with bourgeois capitalism and, furthermore, have done so with surprisingly little sense of the inherent tensions and contradictions of such a synthesis.²

It is at this point that the contributions of all the various groups studying the Bible from various perspectives come into play. Some of them share a number of presuppositions with the biblical scholars whom Gottwald describes, but many do not. They, therefore, ask of the texts different questions and come up with different answers. Their questions and their answers may or may not be legitimate. What is not legitimate is simply to discard them offhand before we give them proper consideration and before we confess to ourselves why it is that we would prefer to discard them.

Let me give you one example. Look at the Nativity story and its sequel as they appear in Matthew 2:1-18. It is the well-known story of the magi, which tradition has adorned with stories of three kings and even with names and places of origin.

In one of the most commonly used commentaries in my own United Methodist Church, *The Interpreter's Bible*, the author of the exegetical session comments:

The value and importance of the narrative do not depend on its accuracy; the story is rather to be thought of as a work of art which the evangelist presents to the Christ child as his offering. Christians who hear it read during the Christmas or Epiphany season instinctively recognize its value, regardless of the question of fact. It expresses the truth that men [sic] have been brought from far and by

many ways to worship Christ. It also breathes the sense of wonder and thanksgiving that through the birth of the Child, and his subsequent life, death, and resurrection, the world has been redeemed. Matthew and his contemporaries felt that even nature itself could not be unmoved in the presence of such a stupendous event.³

And then, in his section on exposition, the same author continues along the same lines.

So, we may notice here the beckonings of God. He set the sign, far above man's reach, in the mystery and majesty of the sky, and in man's longing, for our prime need is not for the grocer or even the doctor, but for the Savior. . . . Yet this story is also a token of man's seeking. There is purpose in the journey itself; that is why Christ was not born in the town where the wise men lived. God safeguards our freedom; he gives the sign, but we may stay or journey.⁴

In the biblical narrative, there follow the stories of the flight into Egypt and the slaughter of the innocents. About the first of these, this particular commentator says little, beyond some reflections on the significance of Egypt. About the second, he makes some commentaries on the problem of evil:

Here is the problem of pain in its stark and terrible maximum. Ramah is our world, and the cry heard in Ramah has often been the voice of the world's weeping. . . . There is no logic to explain the slaughter of Herod or such a tragedy as that of the Children's Crusade.⁵

It is interesting to note that this commentator sees no connection between these stories, which appear to be juxtaposed for no reason whatsoever.

Compare this with the manner in which a group of peasants and fisherfolk in Nicaragua during the time of Somoza's dictatorship read the same text (Solentiname). A young man named Laureano commented that he thought the so-called "wise men" messed things up when they

went to see Herod He said, "It would be like someone going to Somoza now to ask him where's the man who's going to liberate Nicaragua."⁶ Then followed a discussion whose main thrust was that these "wise men" did not understand the manner in which God works and therefore sought the Messiah in a palace, and also that they did not understand the manner in which Herod worked and therefore felt compelled to go and ask his assistance. The net result of it all was that, because of the visit of the magi to Jerusalem, Herod issued orders for the slaughter of the children, and the Holy Family had to flee to Egypt.

Why is it that these uneducated and almost illiterate people can see the connection between the political naivete of the so-called wise men and the tragedies that follow, and the supposedly wiser biblical commentator cannot?

That question can be answered at two different levels that ultimately coalesce. At a general level, one can say that the author that I have quoted, responsible for this particular section of *The Interpreter's Bible*, was reading the Bible the way he had been taught, as a religious book. The Bible deals with religious matters, and one should, therefore, ask of it religious questions. The story of the magi is a religious story, not a political one, no matter that it mentions Herod and speaks of the coming of a king who, from Herod's perspective, would be perceived as a threat. All of that is mere background for the really crucial issues, which are religious.

At another level, one can say that this particular author, although trying to rid himself of all the accretions that tradition has placed on this text --the "three kings," for instance-- is still reading it within a tradition that already tells him what the text says, and all that the text can be expected to say. He rejects the obviously extra-biblical tradition that these are three kings, that they represent three different races, that their names are Melchior, Gaspar, and Baltazar. Yet, he uncritically accepts the tradition of interpretation that says that this text speaks primarily of how all nations shall come to the Lord, of God's use of human yearnings and their manifestation, including astrology, and of God's rule over nature, as seen in the appearance of the star. All that may certainly be part of the meaning of the text. But in approaching it as if it had nothing new to say, the text itself loses authority and is, in fact, replaced by the tradition of its interpretation.

I say that these two reasons coalesce because ultimately the two are the same. The wider tradition of reading the Bible primarily as a religious book and defining religion in narrow, spiritualistic, non-biblical terms is manifested in the particular tradition regarding the interpretation of this specific text.

Why can the peasants and the fisherfolk of Solentiname see the text in a different manner?

Partially because they are poor and unschooled. Because nobody has told them beforehand what the text says and means. Also, because their one presupposition is that the text somehow

relates to them and to their struggle --which curiously enough-- is probably also the one presupposition that the author of the Gospel had about its presumptive readers.

That is not to say that the Solentiname reading exhausts what the text has to say. If that were the case, we could substitute the book that reports their conversations for the gospel itself.

Many years after first having come into contact with this particular interpretation of the story of the magi --more specifically, in January of the current year-- it was my turn to preach on this very text. I knew what I was going to say. Basically, I was going to repeat much of what I had learned from those Nicaraguan peasants, and my point would be that all too often star-gazing religion ends up with the massacre of the innocents.

You remember what was happening last January around Epiphany. Our troops were poised to attack Iraq. Constantly, over radio and television, there were words of support for the upcoming war. (Incidentally, I find it difficult to refer to those events as the "Gulf War." They remind me rather of a bull fight, in which the bull has practically no chance, is bled almost to death by half a dozen pikemen and others, then the matador comes in with a sword that the bull cannot even see, slays the bull, and the whole thing is called a "fight"!)

At any rate, I was preparing to preach on this particular text, and began discussing it with a number of my Hispanic and Black friends, who were very concerned because, amidst all the

hoopla, a disproportionate number of those who would have to risk their lives in the Gulf would be minorities. We were reading along and commenting on what the people in Solentname had said, when something else in the text hit me:

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, ...'" (Matthew 2:3-5)

Do you see what is taking place here? Herod called the chief priests and the scribes. In other words, he called the pastors and the theologians, the religious leaders of his time. And he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. And they answered him. They answered him correctly: "In Bethlehem of Judea." Their theology is perfectly correct. They interpret the Bible correctly, at least as Matthew interprets it. Yet, their theology, too, leads to the slaughter of the innocents.

If the magi, in their political naivete and their star-gazing religion, tell Herod approximately when the Messiah is to be born, the priests and the scribes, in their connivance with Herod and with his power, tell him exactly where.

It is not that their theology is wrong. Their theology is correct. They know the prophecy. They know how to apply it: "In Bethlehem of Judea." But their alliances are wrong. They may call themselves the chief priests and the scribes of the people. But they are Herod's priests and scribes.

It is at this point that the title of this presentation becomes crucial and gains new meaning: "The Bible, the Church, and the Poor." We are living in a world in which poverty has reached enormous levels. In practically every continent, there are people starving by the thousands. In this country, the level of poverty has risen to 13.5 of the total population, or 24% of all children under the age of six.⁷ The top 1% of our population has as much income as all the bottom 40% put together.⁸

It is in this situation of increasing poverty and injustice that we as the church are called to interpret the Bible, just as the priests and scribes were called to interpret it. And I fear for the church. I fear not that its theology might be mistaken, or that it might not know how to interpret a particular text. I fear that, as in ancient times, rather than being the priests and scribes, pastors and theologians *of the people*, we might find it safer, or more convenient, or less controversial, to serve Herod, and thus to betray the very Messiah whom we serve and whom we await.

I, therefore, commend those who have chosen the subject for this evening's reflection. "The Bible, the Church, and the Poor" is not a matter for idle speculation, nor even for curious Bible study. It is a matter on which the very faithfulness of the church, and therefore its life, is at stake.

Notes

1. Norman Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel 1250-1050 B.C. E.* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), p. 10.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
3. Sherman E. Johnson, in *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 7 (New York and Nashville: Abingdon, 1951), p. 256.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 256-57.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 260.
6. Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, vol. 1 (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), p. 62.
7. *The Boston Globe*, September 27, 1991, p. A-1.
8. *The Atlanta Constitution*, Sept. 25, 1991, p. A-14.

The logo for AETH features a stylized 'A' composed of several overlapping, semi-transparent triangles in shades of yellow and pink. Below the 'A' is the word 'AETH' in a large, bold, purple, sans-serif font.