

TOWARD AN EVANGELICAL CARIBBEAN THEOLOGY

by

Marie Reynolds

As we near the twenty-first century, many issues face the nations of the Caribbean. The eloquent words of the chairman of the West Indian Commission, in his preface to the Commission's report, A Time For Action, could well be applied to the region as a whole:

[The] fluent sculpture of time has already changed us; we the diverse people of scattered islands and mainland countries plucked from far continents by cruel history, drawing strength from our variety of race and culture and places of origin, but reaching beyond them for other strengths from uniting elements. Historical forces and the Caribbean Sea have divided us; yet unfolding history and that same Sea, through long centuries of struggle against uneven odds, have been steadily making us one.¹

As a region of young "nations" the Caribbean seeks to solidify that identity in every social, economic, political and cultural institution, including the Christian Church. After centuries of cultural imposition by our various colonisers, and with the continuing cultural influence of the North through travel and the media, we grapple with the tension between "enculturation and acculturation," to use Lewin Williams' expression. We seek to make our institutions our own. Therefore, the task for the Church is to define a theology that we, the Caribbean people, may call our own, rather than the imitation of one imported by "colonial masters."

This paper is a reflection on how such a Caribbean theology might be developed. I will explore the framework for a Caribbean theology by identifying pertinent issues that must be addressed.

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Toward A Caribbean Theology

In seeking to answer the question "What is Caribbean Theology?" William Watty says "Caribbean Theology" is a misnomer, since it implies a reflection on the Caribbean rather than on God.² Should not theology be neutral? After all, God is immutable—the same yesterday, today, and forever, whether in Europe, the Caribbean or America. The real question is: should theology be done from below or from above? Is it our reflection on God, with all the biases that naturally proceed from our perspective, or is it the study of God's word to humankind, a timeless and unchanging message of His plan and purpose?

Biblical Authority

What should be the source and authority of Caribbean Theology? Let me suggest two important sources: one of the source of Caribbean Theology is the Bible. But relationship is two-way: God relating to the creation, and creation relating to God. Theology, therefore, has two sources: Scripture and cultural experience. Since God's concern for His creation embraces more than culture and the powerless, though it certainly includes these, Lewin Williams' definition of the sources of theology is a limited one.³

The Bible as the authoritative, divinely inspired Word of God is the primary source of Theology. Although the Bible was written within a specific cultural context, I am in agreement with John Stott who states that the essential revelation in the text has authority.⁴ The important thing is not that God spoke to mankind in a particular culture (although we must understand that culture to properly interpret the text), but that God spoke. God's perspective and His revelation are perfect, and do not require redefinition by human beings.

Cultural Experiences

In reading the text we bring our cultural experiences to bear on it. We must transpose the text into our present situation and, aside from the universal truths contained therein, seek to understand how God is addressing our context through His word. Furthermore, as Charles Kraft concludes, God is transcendent to culture, yet He is sovereign over it, and speaks through it.⁵ Hence, even as the Bible evidences God's revelation in history, we must seek by His Word and His Holy Spirit to understand his hand in our past and ongoing history.

Defining a Caribbean Theology

Caribbean theology, therefore, is a reflection on the Caribbean from God's perspective, as William Watty defines it.⁶ Yet it is also the reflection of the Caribbean on God, and on how faith in God through Christ must be communicated and lived out by the Church. It is not merely a Black theology, though it should help Afro-Caribbeans to appreciate their roots, nor is it merely liberation theology, although it will reflect on Christ's liberating work. It must address the issues with which the Caribbean Church contends, and enable the Church to bring the Word of God to bear on the situations of the people among whom it has been placed. Thus I agree with Ashley Smith when he says that Caribbean theology must ultimately change people's consciousness of themselves, their region, their history, and the world, and to better relate to these.⁷ I posit, however, that it must first change people's consciousness of God, and improve their relationship with Him, if these objectives are to be achieved in spirit and truth. A Caribbean theology must be prophetic and transformational, and should motivate the Church in the Caribbean to carry out its mission.

The need for a Caribbean theology is especially critical given the history of foreign dominance in the region. The Church rode on the backs of the colonial and plantation systems. Thus, God appeared to be on the side of the powerful oppressors—an absentee God of the absentee landowners, absent from the sufferings of the slaves and indentured labourers, absent from the realities of their lives. In the decades following emancipation, liturgical patterns in mainline churches continue to reflect those of the conqueror," so that as Knolly puts it, the people are unable to own the Church or see worship as their expression to their God.⁸ Even though some Churches have inculcated the Caribbean *joie de vivre* into their worship patterns, there is a sense in which the immanent reality of God still does not touch the people's lives.

The Issues

The concern just stated is one of the issues suggested in the Seoul Declaration as forming part of the agenda for formulating theology in the Caribbean context.⁹ Other issues faced by Caribbean people as they enter the third millennium include:

1. The influence of foreign values and forms via advanced media technology on our continually emerging culture is profound. The West Indian Commission reports that this is of grave concern to people throughout the Caribbean as they see the strengths of community living

and sharing eroded by the individualistic materialism of the North. How do we ensure that our culture, though multifaceted, from many origins, and unique in its diversity, remain Caribbean? With the influence of materialistic, self-oriented, "electronic churches"¹⁰ via the same satellites. The Church is not exempt from this problem.

2. Non-legal unions have been prevalent in the Caribbean for many decades, especially among the poorer classes. This pattern is on the increase, even among the so-called middle and upper classes, a reflection of trends in North America. Springer asks why marriage and family values consistently passed on by the Church, which for centuries have had a greater influence than any other institution, continue to be rejected by the people.¹¹ Perhaps the problem is that the Church has not had as great an influence as he suggests. How can a Caribbean theology better communicate a proper understanding of marriage among our people, and how can it address the financial concerns that often preclude couples from entering into a legitimate union? A theology of male-female relationships should also be addressed within a Caribbean theology.

3. Integration has been a buzzword on the lips of the English speaking Caribbean from time to time over the last three decades. With the changing face of international trade and politics, how can the Caribbean retain a say in global affairs? Do diplomatic and economic strength lie in unity and, given the history of CARICOM, is integration of the wider Caribbean with its four enclaves (English, French, Dutch and Spanish speaking) possible? How can a Caribbean theology address the issue, and does it even fall within the purview of the Church?

4. The AIDS epidemic is rapidly spreading. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Caribbean Epidemiological Centre (CEC) report an upward trend of cases in developing countries, and the Caribbean is no exception. Once defined as a homosexual disease, it is now apparent that it is no respecter of sexual orientation or age. Women and children are particularly at risk. A Caribbean theology must address the relevance of this epidemic and enable the Church to communicate faith in action in the midst of it.

5. The Caribbean depends heavily on agriculture, tourism and mining for economic sustenance. All three industries either affect or are affected by the condition of the environment. A Caribbean theology which illumines God's revelation concerning the world, must address the issue of our stewardship over the earth.¹²

6. Many states in the Caribbean have been experiencing economic decline or stagnation. The West Indian Commission reports that depleted funds and poor management have led to cut-backs in social

services, increased unemployment, and ensuing crime, discontent and selfish individualism. Drug abuse and trafficking form a part of the manifestation of the social discontent that pervades much of the Caribbean.¹³ A theology of suffering and a theology of poverty are vitally needed to address these realities of Caribbean experience. What is God's message to those who are in the throes of these twin woes, and how may God be speaking through them? What does such an existence say concerning the nature and character of God?

7. According to Lewin Williams, the common history of the Caribbean has created its own sense of hope.¹⁴ Kortright Davis echoes this idea when he speaks of the hope that has enabled Caribbean people to survive despite the harsh realities of life.¹⁵ The shared experiences of the Caribbean people have laid the foundation for an understanding of eschatology that can foster a relevant theology not only for the region, but for the universal Church.

I will expand further on only two critical issues which embrace the above: Caribbean integration, and the Church's social responsibility.

Caribbean Integration

Over and over again theological writers cite two things, other than the Caribbean Sea, that seemingly make the Caribbean one people. The first is Caribbean socio-cultural pluralism. Russell defines the "Caribbean Man" as a polarity between diversity and unity. Except for a few distant descendants of aborigines in Dominica, Guyana and Belize, the Caribbean is inhabited by people whose roots are in far-away continents. In the Caribbean has been brought together, voluntarily or involuntarily, a mosaic of peoples and cultures—a unique plurality. This plurality has fostered a spirit of tolerance and adaptability that is a strength of the Caribbean people. As Davis points out, this strength has enabled Caribbean people to succeed in a variety of cultures, and to share their own cultures with others.¹⁶ Yet it is this same strength which could prove to be a weakness, as it makes the region vulnerable to cultural dilution or even to cultural annihilation. The traditional Caribbean traits of community living and sharing are threatened by the invasion of the Western culture of materialism and individualism via media and technology.

The second force which unifies the Caribbean is a shared history of slavery and colonisation. Although the experience differs from island to island, all the territories have experienced a history in which the culture and economic gains of one group of people was imposed on other peoples who came to the region for the benefit of that group.

The critical questions are: Are these sufficient to make us one? Or did God have a specific purpose in bringing us together? Yet how could God have been the author of the brutality, subjection, exploitation and oppression and struggle that have been the mark of our common experience? The fact is that God is the Lord of the nations. God is the ultimate authority over every nation, and over their rulers.¹⁷ "Power and might are in [His] hands, and no-one can withstand [Him]."¹⁸ Though the eyes of God are too pure to behold evil, He is able to use, for His purpose, what mankind intend for evil. Everything was created by God to serve Him, and He exercises complete dominion over the kingdoms of this world. Hence, even though the Caribbean nation is rooted in the brutality of slavery and the oppression of colonisation, God can use the people thus gathered for His good purpose. Perhaps God would use this region to demonstrate the eschatological throne room wherein people from every nation, tongue and tribe will gather to honor and glorify His name in a celebratory hymn of praise.¹⁹

God created us to dwell in community as a reflection of His image.²⁰ God gave us a cultural or dominion mandate, that we should subdue the earth and fill it. So the first purpose of nations is to continue God's creative and productive process upon the earth. When a people conspired to flout God's mandate to fill the earth, He scattered them.²¹ God is sovereign over the nations, and, indeed, is the author of nations. Acts 17:26-27 tells us that God made every nation, and "determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live."²² Hence, the bringing together of multiple peoples and cultures to form the Caribbean was ordained by God, that the cultural mandate be fulfilled (vs. 26) and, ultimately, that the nations should seek and find redemption and fellowship with Him (vs. 27).

God has also set the boundaries of each nation, and apportioned to each an inheritance which it must multiply.²³ God can use nations for specific purposes just as He used Babylon and Assyria to judge Israel.²⁴ The commonalities of history, creative expression, beautiful natural environment, and plurality of people and culture, are a heritage of the Caribbean people, which they must develop and share with other nations, and which God has appointed to serve Him and His purpose.

The task for the Church in the Caribbean is to identify and communicate to the people that purpose as it applies to the Caribbean. While politicians and sociologists continue the struggle for the unification of the region, the Church must provide the integrating factor of God's purpose. The Church, both as an institution and as a people, must take up its prophetic and social responsibility to bring God's purpose and plan to bear on the move for integration.

The Church's Social Responsibility

Some Christians hold the view that the Church should not become involved in the things of the world, because we are to "come out from them and be separate."²⁵ However, I agree with John Stott who says that social responsibility is as much a part of the Church's mission as is evangelism.²⁶ The Church has a prophetic role in the society and, as such, must bring God's Word to bear on every aspect of social life. Christ commissions us to be His witnesses, and Paul adjures us to hold out the word of life amongst a crooked and perverse generation.²⁷

Christ told us that to love God with all our heart, soul and strength, and to love our neighbour as ourselves are the greatest commandments. In fact, the entire law given by God to Israel, as the basis for a holy nation, is anchored on these two.²⁸ God identifies love of Him with the extending of social justice toward others. Isaiah 58 provides the classic text. Herein God points out that sacrifices are of little value to Him if we do not demonstrate concern for the alienated among us.²⁹


This theme is the cornerstone of Christ's mission as identified in the Luke 4:18, 19 reading of the Isaiah 61:1-2 passage. Not only did Christ come to preach and proclaim the gospel, but he also came to perform it, that is, remission from sin for those who are bruised, broken and oppressed by it.³⁰ As the body of Christ, the Church, both the institution and the members of the body, must not only preach about the Kingdom of God, but bring the authority of that Kingdom to bear upon the effects of the Kingdom of darkness. Ashley Smith sees such action as part of the Church's task to set people free from deprivation, victimisation and dependency, so that they may attain to the full stature of Christ, and the quality of humanity exemplified by Christ. While I agree with the first part of his argument, I see that responsibility as a reflection of Christ's compassion and love for the world, which we must possess as His Body—His hands and feet upon the earth—as we continue His ministry of redemption until his return. In so doing, the Church will enlarge the Body of Christ and attain to the fullness of the stature of Christ.

This will require a redefinition of the concept of sin. Although Christ brings salvation and forgiveness from personal sin³¹ the effects of sin can be seen corporately in a nation, an institution, or a social structure, to name a few examples.³² When there is institutional disregard for God, or disobedience of His commands, that constitutes sin. Moreover, institutionalised oppression, injustice and disregard for the plight of the alienated is also viewed by God as sin. We see this in His treatment of Israel. Over and over through the prophets, God cited the nation's injustice as one of the sins for which they faced His judgement.³³

The biblical text confirms Gutiérrez's statement that to know God is to do justice.³⁴ God is a God of justice and mercy. Righteousness and justice are the very foundations of His throne.³⁵

Christ said that to love Him is to obey His commands. If we love God, then it must show forth in our love and concern for others, for to know God is to love, and the one who loves God should also love his sister/brother.³⁶ If the Church is the people of God, then the Church must proclaim, by word and deed, His justice and His righteousness, speaking forth prophetically to the nation, and striving for justice in every aspect of its life. It is the Church's responsibility; indeed it is a commandment from the Lord.

Conclusion

The need for a Caribbean Theology is manifestly evident. If the Caribbean people are to understand the true nature of God, and His Work for the Caribbean people, and see these as relevant to their life situations, then a theology which addresses us within our cultural context is vital. Such a theology must address pertinent issues, but must hold up Biblical authority as the primary source of theology. A Caribbean theology must serve to transform and motivate the Church, so that the Church might be the channel of the Holy Spirit to transform and motivate the nation in which God has placed it. It must fulfill the promise of Christ to give life and that more abundantly.³⁷ 

NOTES

1. West Indian Commission, Time for Action: Report of the West Indian Commission, 2nd ed. (Kingston: The Press, 1993); The West Indian Commission, 1992, xxi.
2. William Watty, From Shore to Shore: Soundings in Caribbean Theology (Kingston, Jamaica, 1981), 1.
3. Lewin L. Williams, "The indigenization of theology in the Caribbean" (Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary, New York, 1989), 151.
4. John Stott, The Contemporary Christian: An urgent plea for double listening (Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 196.
5. Charles H. Kraft, Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1979), 113-115.
6. *Ibid.*, 11.

7. Ashley Smith, Emerging from Innocence: Religion, Theology and Development (Mandeville: Eureka Press, 1991), 13.
8. Knolly, 142.
9. "The Seoul Declaration: Toward an Evangelical Theology for the Third World," in The Bible and Theology in Asian Contexts, eds. Bong R. Ro, and R. Eshenaur. (Seoul: Word of Life Press, 1984), 26.
10. Alan Kirton, "Current Trends in Caribbean Theology and the Role of the Church," Caribbean Quarterly, Vol. 37, No. 1, March 1991.
11. James Springer, "West Indian Value System and the Church's Validating Role." In Troubling of the waters, ed. Idris Hamid (San Fernando, Trinidad: Rahaman Printery, 1973), 133-34.
12. Genesis 1:28-30.
13. West Indian Commission, 72-3.
14. Williams, 106.
15. Davis, ix.
16. Davis, 23.
17. Daniel 4:32; 7:14, NIV.
18. 2 Chronicles 20:6, NIV.
19. Revelation 5:9, NIV.
20. Genesis 1:28.
21. Genesis 11:8-9.
22. NIV.
23. Deuteronomy 32:8.
24. Jeremiah 4:7; Habbakuk 1:5-12, NIV.
25. 2 Corinthians 6:17; Isaiah 52:11, NIV.
26. Stott, Contemporary Christian, 341.
27. Acts 1:8; Philippians 2:15, 16, NIV.
28. Matthew 22:37-40, NIV.
29. Isaiah 58:6-8, NIV.
30. The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament, Comp. and ed. Spiros Zodhiates (Iowa Falls: World Bible Publishers, Inc., 1992), s.v. "ἀφεσιζ" and "ἠρρωω."

31. Luke 1:77.
32. Proverbs 14:34.
33. Isaiah 58:1-7; Jeremiah 22:1-5; Amos 2:6-8; Micah 2:2-3.
34. Gustavo Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation, trans. and eds. Sister Caridad India and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973).
35. Psalm 97:2, NASB.
36. 1 John 4:8, 21.
37. John 10:10.