

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 10

Volume 10 • Number 3 • July 1986

**Evangelical
Review of
Theology** p. 199

Leroy S. Capper, under care of the Missouri Presbytery (Presbyterian Church of America), is a 1985 graduate *summa cum laude* of Covenant Theological Seminary. **p. 228**

Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation

Vatican, Rome

Printed with permission

This is the second half of the Instruction (the first half was published in the last issue of ERT) which was adopted at an ordinary meeting of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith and was approved at an audience granted to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger by his Holiness Pope John Paul II on 6th August, 1984.

This Instruction is one of the clearest and the most incisive evaluations of liberation theologies. Evangelicals will no doubt profit from several of the scriptural truths outlined in this document. We agree with the analysis that the aspiration and 'the positive will' for liberation is the result of Christian gospel. We also endorse the emphasis of liberation from sin as the primary and the basic liberation. But there are also some aspects which we cannot accept such as the voice of the Magisterium (the Church's authority over the Scriptures and the tradition). A further clarification is needed. The document uses the term 'evangelical' to mean 'Christian', 'spiritual', or 'gospel' rather than a reference to the theological stance of the historic movement for the defence and proclamation of biblical faith and authority.

The document also acknowledges certain significant limitations. It does not address itself to all the liberation theologies but rather only to those who have been inspired by the Marxist analysis and to those who have atheistic tendencies built into their framework. Some liberation theologies are more strongly grounded in biblical principles than others.

ERT will be publishing two important documents in the next issues: one will give an Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism—the result of more than two years' study by the Theological Commission's Task Force dealing with the issue and the other is the Singapore Statement, from the Theological Commission's consultation in Singapore in June 1986. Both are very relevant for the theme under discussion.

(Editors)

IX THE THEOLOGICAL APPLICATION OF THIS CORE

1. The positions here in question are often brought out explicitly in certain of the writings of 'theologians of liberation'. In others, they follow logically from their premises. In addition, they are presupposed in certain liturgical practices, as for example a 'Eucharist' transformed into a celebration of the people in struggle, even though the persons **p. 229** who participate in these practices may not be fully conscious of it. We are facing, therefore, a real system, even if some hesitate to follow the logic to its conclusion. As such, this system is a perversion of the Christian message as God entrusted it to His Church.

This message in its entirety finds itself then called into question by the 'theologies of liberation'.

2. It is not the *fact* of social stratification with all its inequity and injustice, but the *theory* of class struggle as the fundamental law of history which has been accepted by these 'theologies of liberation' as a principle. The conclusion is drawn that the class struggle thus understood divides the Church herself, and that in light of this struggle even ecclesial realities must be judged.

The claim is even made that it would be maintaining an illusion with bad faith to propose that love in its universality can conquer what is the primary structural law of capitalism.

3. According to this conception, the class struggle is the driving force of history. History thus becomes a central notion. It will be affirmed that God Himself makes history. It will be added that there is only one history, one in which the distinction between the history of salvation and profane history is no longer necessary. To maintain the distinction would be to fall into 'dualism'. Affirmations such as these reflect historicist immanentism. Thus there is a tendency to identify the kingdom of God and its growth with the human liberation movement, and to make history itself the subject of its own development, as a process of the self-redemption of man by means of the class struggle.

This identification is in opposition to the faith of the Church as it has been reaffirmed by the Second Vatican Church.²³

4. Along these lines, some go so far as to identify God Himself with history and to define faith as 'fidelity to history', which means adhering to a political policy which is suited to the growth of humanity, conceived of as a purely temporal messianism.

5. As a consequence, faith, hope and charity are given a new content: they become 'fidelity to history', 'confidence in the future', and 'option for the poor'. This is tantamount to saying they have been emptied of their theological reality.

6. A radical politicization of faith's affirmations and of the theological judgments follows inevitably from this new conception. The question no longer has to do with simply drawing attention to the consequences and political implications of the truths of faith, which p. 230 are respected beforehand for their transcendent value. In this new system, every affirmation of faith or of theology is subordinated to a political criterion, which in turn depends on the class struggle, the driving force of history.

7. As a result, participation in the class struggle is presented as a requirement of charity itself. The desire to love everyone here and now, despite his class, and to go out to meet him with the non-violent means of dialogue and persuasion, is denounced as counterproductive and opposed to love.

If one holds that a person should not be the object of hate, it is claimed nevertheless that, if he belongs to the objective class of the rich, he is *primarily* a class enemy to be fought. Thus the universality of love of neighbour and brotherhood become an eschatological principle, which will only have meaning for the 'new man' who arises out of the victorious revolution.

8. As far as the Church is concerned, this system would see her *only* as a reality interior to history, herself subject to those laws which are supposed to govern the development of history in its immanence. The Church, the gift of God and mystery of faith, is emptied of any specific reality by this reductionism. At the same time, it is disputed that the participation of Christians who belong to opposing classes at the same Eucharistic Table still makes any sense.

²³ Cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 9-17.

9. In its positive meaning the *Church of the poor* signifies the preference given to the poor, without exclusion, whatever the form of their poverty, because they are preferred by God. The expression also refers to the Church of our time, as communion and institution and on the part of her members, becoming more fully conscious of the requirement of evangelical poverty.

10. But the 'theologies of liberation', which reserve credit for restoring to a place of honour the great texts of the prophets and of the Gospel in defence of the poor, go on to a disastrous confusion between the *poor* of the Scripture and the *proletariat* of Marx. In this way they pervert the Christian meaning of the poor, and they transform the fight for the rights of the poor into a class fight within the ideological perspective of the class struggle. For them, the *Church of the poor* signifies the Church of the class which has become aware of the requirements of the revolutionary struggle as a step toward liberation and which celebrates this liberation in its liturgy.

11. A further remark regarding the expression, *Church of the People*, will not be out of place here. From the pastoral point of view, this expression might mean the favoured recipients of evangelization to whom, because of their condition, the Church extends her pastoral p. 231 love first of all. One might also refer to the Church as the people of God, that is, people of the New Covenant established in Christ.²⁴

12. But the 'theologies of liberation' of which we are speaking, mean by *Church of the People* a Church of the class, a Church of the oppressed people whom it is necessary to 'conscientize' in the light of the organized struggle for freedom. For some, the people, thus understood, even become the object of faith.

13. Building on such a conception of the Church of the People, a critique of the very structures of the Church is developed. It is not simply the case of fraternal correction of pastors of the Church whose behaviour does not reflect the evangelical spirit of service and is linked to old-fashioned signs of authority which scandalize the poor. It has to do with a challenge to the *sacramental and hierarchical structure* of the Church, which was willed by the Lord Himself. There is a denunciation of members of the hierarchy and the magisterium as objective representatives of the ruling class which has to be opposed. Theologically, this position means that ministers take their origin from the people who therefore designate ministers of their own choice in accord with the needs of their historic revolutionary mission.

X A NEW HERMENEUTIC

1. The partisan conception of truth, which can be seen in the revolutionary *praxis* of the class, corroborates this position. Theologians who do not share the theses of the 'theology of liberation', the hierarchy, and especially the Roman Magisterium are thus discredited *in advance* as belonging to the class of the oppressors. Their theology is a theology of class. Arguments and teachings thus do not have to be examined in themselves since they are only reflections of class interests. Thus, the instruction of others is decreed to be, in principle, false.

2. Here is where the global and all-embracing character of the theology of liberation appears. As a result, it must be criticized not just on the basis of this or that affirmation, but on the basis of its classist viewpoint, which it has adopted *a priori*, and which has come to function in it as a determining principle.

3. Because of this classist presupposition, it becomes very difficult, not to say impossible, to engage in a real dialogue with some theologians of liberation' in such a way

²⁴ Cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 39.

that the other participant is listened to, and his arguments are discussed with objectivity and attention. For these theologians start out with the idea, more or less p. 232 consciously, that the viewpoint of the oppressed and revolutionary class, which is their own, is the single true point of view. Theological criteria for truth are thus relativized and subordinated to the imperatives of the class struggle. In this perspective, *orthodoxy* or the right rule of faith, is substituted by the notion of *orthopraxy* as the criterion of the truth. In this connection it is important not to confuse practical orientation, which is proper to traditional theology in the same way that speculative orientation is, with the recognized and privileged priority given to a certain type of *praxis*. For them, this *praxis* is the revolutionary *praxis* which thus becomes the supreme criterion for theological truth. A healthy theological method no doubt will always take the *praxis* of the Church into account and will find there one of its foundations, but that is because that *praxis* comes from the faith and is a lived expression of it.

4. For the 'theologies of liberation', however, the social doctrine of the Church is rejected with disdain. It is said that it comes from the illusion of a possible compromise, typical of the middle class which has no historic destiny.

5. The new *hermeneutic* inherent in the 'theologies of liberation' leads to an essentially *political* re-reading of the Scriptures. Thus, a major importance is given to the *Exodus* event inasmuch as it is a liberation from political servitude. Likewise, a political reading of the *Magnificat* is proposed. The mistake here is not in bringing attention to a political dimension of the readings of Scripture, but in making of this one dimension the principal or exclusive component. This leads to a reductionist reading of the Bible.

6. Likewise, one places oneself within the perspective of a temporal messianism, which is one of the most radical of the expressions of secularization of the Kingdom of God and of its absorption into the immanence of human history.

7. In giving such priority to the political dimension, one is led to deny the *radical newness* of the New Testament and above all to misunderstand the person of Our Lord Jesus Christ, true God and true man, and thus the specific character of the salvation he gave us, that is above all liberation from sin, which is the source of all evils.

8. Moreover in setting aside the authoritative interpretation of the Church, denounced as classist, one is at the same time departing from tradition. In that way, one is robbed of an essential theological criterion of interpretation and, in the vacuum thus created, one welcomes the most radical theses of rationalist exegesis. Without a critical eye, one returns to the opposition of the 'Jesus of history' versus the 'Jesus of faith'. p. 233

9. Of course the creeds of the faith are literally preserved, especially the Chalcedonian creed, but a new meaning is given to them which is a negation of the faith of the Church. On one hand, the Christological doctrine of Tradition is rejected in the name of class; on the other hand, one claims to meet again the 'Jesus of history' coming from the revolutionary experience of the struggle of the poor for their liberation.

10. One claims to be reliving an experience similar to that of Jesus. The experience of the poor struggling for their liberation, which was Jesus' experience, would thus reveal, and it alone, the knowledge of the true God and of the Kingdom.

11. Faith in the Incarnate Word, dead and risen for all men, and whom 'God made Lord and Christ'²⁵ is denied. In its place is substituted a figure of Jesus who is a kind of symbol who sums up in Himself the requirements of the struggle of the oppressed.

12. An exclusively political interpretation is thus given to the death of Christ. In this way, its value for salvation and the whole economy of redemption is denied.

13. This new interpretation thus touches the whole of the Christian mystery.

²⁵ Cf. Acts 2, 36.

14. In a general way, this brings about what can be called an inversion of symbols. Thus, instead of seeing, with St. Paul, a figure of Baptism in the Exodus,²⁶ some end up making of it a symbol of the political liberation of the people.

15. When the same hermeneutical criterion is applied to the life and to the hierarchical constitution of the Church, the relationship between the hierarchy and the 'base' becomes the relationship of obedient domination to the law of the struggle of the classes. Sacramentality, which is at the root of the ecclesial ministries and which makes of the Church a spiritual reality which cannot be reduced to a purely sociological analysis, is quite simply ignored.

16. This inversion of symbols is likewise verified in the area of the *sacraments*. The Eucharist is no longer to be understood as the real sacramental presence of the reconciling sacrifice, and as the gift of the Body and Blood of Christ. It becomes a celebration of the people in their struggle. As a consequence, the unity of the Church is radically denied. Unity, reconciliation and communion in love are no longer seen as a gift we receive from Christ.²⁷ It is the historical class of the [p. 234](#) poor who by means of their struggle will build unity. For them, the struggle of the classes is the way to unity. The Eucharist thus becomes the Eucharist of the class. At the same time, they deny the triumphant force of the love of God which has been given to us.

XI ORIENTATIONS

1. The warning against the serious deviations of some 'theologies of liberation' must not be taken as some kind of approval, even indirect, of those who keep the poor in misery, who profit from that misery, who notice it while doing nothing about it, or who remain indifferent to it. The Church, guided by the Gospel of mercy and by the love for mankind, hears the cry for justice²⁸ and intends to respond to it with all her might.

2. Thus a great call goes out to all the Church: with boldness and courage, with farsightedness and prudence, with zeal and strength of spirit, with a love for the poor which demands sacrifice; pastors will consider the response to this call a matter of the highest priority, as many already do.

3. All priests, religious and laypeople who hear this call for justice and who want to work for evangelization and the advancement of mankind, will do so in communion with their bishop and with the Church, each in accord with his or her own specific ecclesial vocation.

4. Aware of the ecclesial character of their vocation, theologians will collaborate loyally and with a spirit of dialogue with the Magisterium of the Church. They will be able to recognize in the Magisterium a gift of Christ to His Church²⁹ and will welcome its word and its directives with filial respect.

5. It is only when one begins with the task of evangelization understood in its entirety that the authentic requirements of human progress and liberation are appreciated. This

²⁶ Cf. 1 Co. [10, 1-2](#).

²⁷ Cf. Eph. [2, 11-22](#).

²⁸ Cf. *Doc. de Puebla*, I, II, 3. 3.

²⁹ Cf. [Lk. 10, 16](#).

liberation has as its indispensable pillars: *the truth about Jesus the Saviour, the truth about the Church, and the truth about man and his dignity*.³⁰

It is in light of the Beatitudes, and especially the Beatitude of the poor of heart, that the Church, which wants to be the Church of the poor throughout the world, intends to come to the aid of the noble struggle for truth and justice. She addresses each person, and for that [p. 235](#) reason, every person. She is the 'universal Church. The Church of the Incarnation. She is not the Church of one class or another. And she speaks in the name of truth itself. This truth is realistic'. It leads to a recognition 'of every human reality, every injustice, every tension and every struggle'³¹

6. An effective defence of justice needs to be based on the truth of mankind, created in the image of God and called to the grace of divine sonship. The recognition of the true relationship of human beings to God constitutes the foundation of justice to the extent that it rules the relationships between people. That is why the fight for the rights of man, which the Church does not cease to reaffirm, constitutes the authentic fight for justice.

7. The truth of mankind requires that this battle be fought in ways consistent with human dignity. That is why the systematic and deliberate recourse to blind violence, no matter from which side it comes, must be condemned.³² To put one's trust in violent means in the hope of restoring more justice is to become the victim of a fatal illusion: violence begets violence and degrades man. It mocks the dignity of man in the person of the victims and it debases that same dignity among those who practise it.

8. The acute need for radical reforms of the structures which conceal poverty and which are themselves forms of violence, Should not let us lose sight of the fact that the source of injustice is in the hearts of men. Therefore it is only by making an appeal to the *moral potential* of the person and to the constant need for interior conversion, that social change will be brought about which will truly be in the service of man.³³ For it will only be in the measure that they collaborate freely in these necessary changes through their own initiative and in solidarity, that people, awakened to a sense of their responsibility, will grow in humanity.

The inversion of morality and structures is steeped in a materialist anthropology which is incompatible with the dignity of mankind.

9. It is therefore an equally fatal illusion to believe that these new structures will of themselves give birth to a 'new man' in the sense of the truth of man. The Christian cannot forget that it is only the Holy Spirit who has been given to us Who is the source of every true renewal and that God is the Lord of History. [p. 236](#)

10. By the same token, the overthrow by means of revolutionary violence of structures which generate violence is not *ipso facto* the beginning of a just regime. A major fact of our time ought to evoke the reflection of all those who would sincerely work for the true liberation of their brothers: millions of our own contemporaries legitimately yearn to recover those basic freedoms of which they were deprived by totalitarian and atheistic regimes which came to power by violent and revolutionary means, precisely in the name of the liberation of the people. This shame of our time cannot be ignored: while claiming to bring them freedom, these regimes keep whole nations in conditions of servitude which

³⁰ Cf. John Paul II, *Address at the Opening of the Conference at Puebla*, AAS 71 (1979) pp. 188–196; *Doc. de Puebla* II P, c. 1.

³¹ Cf. John Paul II, *Address to the Favela 'Vidigd' at Rio de Janeiro*, 2 July 1980, AAS 72 (1980) pp. 852–858.

³² *Doc. de Puebla*, II, c. II, 5. 4.

³³ Cf. *Doc. de Puebla*, IV, c. 3. 3. 1.

are unworthy of mankind. Those who, perhaps inadvertently, make themselves accomplices of similar enslavements betray the very poor they mean to help.

11. The class struggle as a road toward a classless society is a myth which slows reform and aggravates poverty and injustice. Those who allow themselves to be caught up in fascination with this myth should reflect on the bitter examples history has to offer about where it leads. They would then understand that we are not talking here about abandoning an effective means of struggle on behalf of the poor for an ideal which has no practical effects. On the contrary, we are talking about freeing oneself from a delusion in order to base oneself squarely on the Gospel and its power of realization.

12. One of the conditions for necessary theological correction is giving proper value to the *social teaching of the Church*. This teaching is by no means closed. It is, on the contrary, open to all the new questions which are so numerous today. In this perspective, the contribution of theologians and other thinkers in all parts of the world to the reflection of the Church is indispensable today.

13. Likewise the experience of those who work directly for evangelization and for the advancement of the poor and the oppressed is necessary for the doctrinal and pastoral reflection of the Church. In this sense, it is necessary to affirm that one becomes more aware of certain aspects of truth by starting with *praxis*, if by that one means pastoral *praxis* and social work which keeps its evangelical inspiration.

14. The teaching of the Church on social issues indicates the main lines of ethical orientation. But in order that it be able to guide action directly, the Church needs competent people from a scientific and technological viewpoint, as well as in the human and political sciences. Pastors should be attentive to the formation of persons of such capability who live the Gospel deeply. Laypersons, whose proper mission is to build society, are involved here to the highest degree.

15. The theses of the 'theologies of liberation' are widely popularized [p. 237](#) under a simplified form, in formation sessions or in what are called 'base groups' which lack the necessary catechetical and theological preparation as well as the capacity for discernment. Thus these theses are accepted by generous men and women without any critical judgment being made.

16. That is why pastors must look after the quality and the content of catechesis and formation which should always present the *whole message of salvation* and the imperatives of true liberation within the framework of this whole message.

17. In this full presentation of Christianity, it is proper to emphasize those essential aspects which the 'theologies of liberation' especially tend to misunderstand or to eliminate, namely: the transcendence and gratuity of liberation in Jesus Christ, true God and true man; the sovereignty of grace; and the true nature of the means of salvation, especially of the Church and the sacraments. One should also keep in mind the true meaning of ethics in which the distinction between good and evil is not relativized, the real meaning of sin, the necessity for conversion, and the universality of the law of fraternal love.

One needs to be on guard against the politicization of existence which, misunderstanding the entire meaning of the Kingdom of God and the transcendence of the person, begins to sacralize politics and betray the religion of the people in favour of the projects of the revolution.

18. The defenders of orthodoxy are sometimes accused of passivity, indulgence or culpable complicity regarding the intolerable situations of justice and the political regimes which prolong them. Spiritual conversion the intensity of the love of God and neighbour, zeal for justice and peace, the Gospel meaning of the poor and of poverty, are required of everyone, and especially of pastors and those in positions of responsibility.

The concern for the purity of the faith demands giving the answer of effective witness in the service of one's neighbour, the poor and the oppressed in particular, in an integral theological fashion. By the witness of their dynamic and constructive power to love, Christians will thus lay the foundations of this 'civilization of love' of which the Conference of Puebla spoke, following Paul VI.³⁴ Moreover there are already many priests, religious and laypeople who are consecrated in a truly evangelical way for the creation of a just society.

CONCLUSION

The words of Paul VI in his *Profession of Faith*, express with full **P. 238** clarity the faith of the Church, from which one cannot deviate without provoking, besides spiritual disaster, new miseries and new types of slavery.

'We profess our faith that the Kingdom of God, begun here below in the Church of Christ, is not of this world, whose form is passing away, and that its own growth cannot be confused with the progress of civilization, of science or of human technology, but that it consists in knowing ever more deeply the unfathomable riches of Christ, to hope ever more strongly in things eternal, to respond ever more ardently to the love of God, to spread ever more widely grace and holiness among men. But it is this very same love which makes the Church constantly concerned for the true temporal good of mankind as well. Never ceasing to recall to her children that they have no lasting dwelling here on earth, she urges them also to contribute, each according to this own vocation and means, to the welfare of their earthly city, to promote justice, peace and brotherhood among men, to lavish their assistance on their brothers, especially on the poor and the most dispirited. The intense concern of the Church, the bride of Christ, for the needs of mankind, their joys and their hopes, their pains and their struggles, is nothing other than the great desire to be present to them in order to enlighten them with the light of Christ, and join them all to Him, their only Saviour. It can never mean that the Church is conforming to the things of this world, nor that she is lessening the earnestness with which she awaits her Lord and the eternal Kingdom.'³⁵ **p. 239**

The Humanity of God and of Man: An Introduction to Eberhard Jüngel

John Webster

Reprinted from Evangel Spring 1984 with permission

Eberhard Jüngel is Professor of Systematic Theology and the Philosophy of Religion in the University of Tübingen, and one of the most prominent of contemporary Protestant

³⁴ Cf. *Doc. de Puebla*, IV, II, 2.3.

³⁵ Paul VI, *Profession of Faith of the People of God*, 30 June 1968, AAS 60 (1968) pp. 443–444.