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If there is sufficient evidence, on other grounds, to show that the Scripture, in which this doctrine is received, is a Revelation from God, the doctrine p. 335 itself must be unconditionally received, not as reasonable, nor as unreasonable, but as scriptural.¹⁷

THE EVANGELICAL POSITION

Finally, we may briefly delineate the minimum which is required for the maintenance of the universality of the Gospel. The doctrine of a final separation is cognate with the normative status of the revelation in Jesus Christ and Holy Scripture. Any denial of the one undermines the other. There is scope for more and less positive assessments of the degree to which non-Christian religion perceives the truth, and also for considerable difference (some of it related to the assessment of non-Christian religion and the possibility of 'anonymous Christianity' of some kind, some not) as to the classes of person who will be found on each side of the final divide. And, of course, there is particular scope for disagreement as to the comparative numbers involved. Our contention is that these and others are entirely 'proper' questions, indeed that they are questions we have no option but to ask. Our arbiter, of course, must be Holy Scripture. What is crucial is to maintain the integrity and the uniqueness of the Christian revelation, since it is this which is in doubt; and not to forget that the religion which is seeking to take its place is ultimately that of natural man. We know that such religion is 'natural' not merely in repudiating the supernatural, but in repudiating the spiritual too, and with it the very principle of a revelation to man from God as its foundation. And it is not finally a religion which comes from man, but from elsewhere.

'Has God said?', asked the serpent, initiating this self-same debate in which we are currently engaged; and as he has persisted his question has gained him a hearing.

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The New Ecclesiology in Latin America

C. René Padilla

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This paper was presented by its author to the WEF Theological Commission's triennial meetings held at Singapore in 1986. It describes and assesses the peculiar Latin American phenomenon. Though not much known, the 'BEC' is at least as revolutionary and significant a development as its complementary part, the Theology of Liberation. In conclusion the author also brings out certain implications for the evangelicals of BEC—social, ministerial and missional.

—Editor.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 118, fourth edition.

The changes that have taken place in the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America in the last two decades are amazing. To persons of my age, familiar with the problems of traditional Catholicism in this part of the world, the difference between the Catholic Church they knew in their youth and the Catholic Church they see today is so great that it is almost beyond comprehension. To be sure, the old Church, sadly hampered by its heavy hierarchical structure, is still there, and one wonders sometimes whether all the changes will not in the end be neutralized by it. The fact remains, however, that a new Church is taking shape in the womb of the old and that this may rightly be regarded as the most promising development within Roman Catholicism today. According to Leonardo Boll, the distinguished Brazilian theologian, 'A true "ecclesiogenesis" is in progress throughout the world, a Church being born from the faith of the poor' (1985: 9). In the present paper we will examine the ecclesiology that underlies that development, in an attempt to see what we need to learn from it. In the first section we will look at the new ecclesiology from a historical perspective, in the second section we will outline its basic tenets, and in the third section we will consider its challenge to Protestant Christians.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE NEW ECCLESIOLOGY

The new ecclesiology in Latin America is clearly related to the so-called 'comunidades eclesiales de base' (grassroots ecclesial communities)¹ **P. 337** that have emerged as the new model for the Church in several countries, especially in Brazil. It is the ecclesiology of liberation theology. Its function is to articulate the communal experience of a growing number of Christians, most of them Roman Catholic, who are rediscovering the meaning of the Christian faith for practical life in a context of oppression and poverty.

The origin of the grassroots community movement may be traced back to the early fifties, to a time when a number of priests and nuns started experimenting with a new approach to popular catechesis, mainly in response to the challenge of Protestantism and the challenge of the socioeconomic situation.

The Protestant Challenge

Already at the turn of the last century, when the first plenary Latin American Council held in Rome in 1899 analyzed the dangers threatening the Roman Catholic Church, Protestantism was listed together with Masonry, superstition, paganism, liberalism, and secularism. Evidently, the seed planted by Protestant missionaries during the nineteenth century was bearing fruit; despite the great opposition on the part of the established Church, Protestant churches were rapidly gaining ground and could not be ignored. By 1955, Protestantism had become a matter of such a great concern to Roman Catholic clergy that the first Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) meeting in Rio de Janeiro regarded it as one of the main hostile forces that made it necessary to request the help of missionaries from Europe and North America.

The kind of challenge that Protestantism posed to Roman Catholicism is clearly illustrated by an experiment that took place in Barra do Pirai, in Northeastern Brazil, in 1956, described by JoséMarins in the following terms:

¹ 'Basic' does not adequately translate the Spanish and Portuguese expression 'de base'. *Base* is used to refer to the grassroots of a social group and in the phrase 'comunidades eclesiales de base', it has social, political, economic, cultural, and theological connotations. It points to the 'popular classes', powerless, poor, uneducated who constitute the large majority of the laity in the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America.

It began when an old woman said to the bishop during a pastoral visitation of her area, 'In Natal the three Protestant churches are lit up and crowded. We hear their hymn-singing ... and our Catholic church, closed, is in darkness ... because we don't get a priest.' This challenge prompted some fundamental questions such as: If there aren't any priests, does everything p. 338 have to stop? Cannot anyone else do anything for the life of the Church community? (1979: 237).

Bishop Angelo Rossi was thus encouraged to start a movement of lay catechists who acted as co-ordinators in 'natural communities' and got people together to read the Bible, to pray, to hold 'Mass without a priest', and to discuss matters of common interest. Traditional chapels gave way to community meeting halls which were used not only for catechetical instruction but also for other purposes (ibid.: 237-8).

As can be inferred from this experiment, it is obvious that at the basis of the grassroots community movement was the challenge of Protestantism with its emphasis on lay leadership. This is not surprising in light of the problems of a church chronically affected by a serious shortage of priests. Another aspect of that challenge was the Protestant (and especially congregational) emphasis on the local church. In line with the best evangelical congregational tradition, singing, praying and studying the Bible together, sharing problems and resources with one another, and taking decisions and serving in a small community became essential aspects of the Christian experience of people who had previously known the body of Christ only as a dogma—'the Mystical Body of Christ'—or as a hierarchical society in which they were passive members. The religious aspect of the life of the grassroots communities is so important that according to Cardinal Ams, Archbishop of Sao Paulo,

People do not come to the BCC [basic Christian communities] when there is no praying and singing. They may come four or five times to organize practical things, but nothing further will come out of it. When, however, people pray and sing, when they feel themselves together, when the Gospel is read and, on this basis, concrete actions are organized and the national situation is analyzed, then the groups remain united. Along with the Gospels, this religiosity is the most valuable element in the BCCs. (Shaull 1984: 122).

The Socioeconomic Challenge

In his important study on the grassroots ecclesial communities, Guillermo Cook has characterized the masses of Latin American poor in terms of cultural alienation, socio-cultural marginalization and religious vitality (1985: 34). 'Herein,' says he, 'we find the roots of the CEBs.' As a matter of fact, it is among the poor, powerless and uneducated, whose experience of Christianity has oftentimes been reduced to participation in the rites and processions encouraged by popular Catholic religiosity, that the grassroots communities have emerged. p. 339

Concern for the formation of a powerful and educated elite to exercise political control has always been part and parcel of Roman Catholicism in Latin America. Beginning in 1929, the Catholic Action movement, inspired by the French philosopher Jacques Maritain and promoted by Pope Pius XI, was used as a means to shape a new social consciousness, especially among the upper class. It became the organizational core of several labour groups working on development projects and co-operatives to improve the situation of the poor. On the political level, the effort to produce a 'revolution in freedom' was channelled through the Christian Democratic parties, which were organized in several countries. Social injustice was to be solved through 'development'.

This desire to provide a way to minimize the effects of poverty on the masses was coupled with the fear that the working class may turn to Communism. Yet, contrary to

predictions, the development projects did very little to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor and an important sector of the Roman Catholic clergy and laity became politically radical.

Another important development took place in the early sixties: thousands of North American missionaries, priests, nuns, and lay people went to Latin America in answer to Pope John's call to 're-evangelize' the continent. Gerald M. Costello has described this 'modern crusade' unlike anything else in the history of the U.S. Roman Catholic Church, and the way in which most of the missionaries went back home leaving behind 'the problems of Latin America [which seemed] no less staggering than they did before the missionaries [had] arrived' (1979: 1). They had found that building U.S.-style churches was far easier than getting people to participate in the life of the Church. Only a few of these missionaries stayed ... 'a stubborn few of those non-professionals who had found their place in ministering to the tormented of this vast land ... people who had spent generations as victims of one oppressor or another' (ibid.: 4–5). Then, Costello adds,

A new mission approach began to emerge, radically new. It sprang, significantly, from Latin Americans themselves, and it was the haunting spectre of oppression that had spawned it. Making people aware of the oppression was part of it; another part was in encouraging to develop ideas on how to fight it. The missionaries who remained began to learn instead of to teach, to serve instead of to lead. And, somehow, that became the operative mission approach, and it goes on—tested, hardened, imperfect, searching, committed. It has been that way in hundreds of U.S.-staffed missions in Latin America. (Ibid.: 5) p. 340

Living among the poor to make them aware of their oppression—*conscientization*—and to encourage them to find a way out of it—*liberation*—had thus been adopted as the approach to the 're-evangelization' of a Roman Catholic continent where the official Church had always identified itself with the rich and powerful. By the time the second CELAM General Conference met in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968, this approach had become so widely accepted that the 130 prelates present condemned the 'institutionalized violence' fostered by capitalism and neo-colonialism, encouraged the promotion of popular education and organizations (especially through grassroots communities), and supported a definite 'preferential option for the poor'. The Medellín Conclusions became the basis for social activism and the sections dealing with justice, peace and poverty provided the framework for the development of liberation theology and the new ecclesiology. The third CELAM General Conference, held in Puebla in 1979, ratified the preferential option for the poor and described the grassroots communities as 'one of the causes for joy and hope in the church' because of their potential as 'centres of evangelization and moving forces for liberation and development' (*Pastoral de conjunto*, No. 10). The Puebla Document did warn against the danger that the grassroots communities grow out of control of the hierarchy and become 'sectarian', but at the same time it stated that:

In particular we have found that small communities, especially the CEBs, create more personal inter-relations, acceptance of God's Word, reexamination of one's life, and reflection on reality in the light of the Gospel. They accentuate committed involvement in the family, one's work, the neighbourhood, and the local community. We are happy to single out the multiplication of small communities as an important ecclesial event that is peculiarly ours, and as 'the hope of the Church.' (*Puebla Document*: 629).

In the grassroots communities the rejects of society are discovering their own worth. They are learning that the evils of poverty and marginalization are not their God-given fate, and that they have power to change their situation through solidarity and mutual

help, local initiatives and a common struggle for justice. The power of oppression is thus broken and hope of a better future is born because the basis is laid for power to be exercised *from the bottom up*, not only in the Church but also in society.

Clearly the grassroots community movement has become a concrete Christian response to the socioeconomic challenge posed by the situation of the masses in Latin America. Many would agree with p. 341 Shaull's estimate that 'this vital religious movement is fast becoming *the most powerful political force working for change in Latin America* ... often to the surprise of its own members' (1984: 126). It is not surprising that during the last two decades the grassroots communities have oftentimes become the object of violent government repression in several countries. Beyond doubt, even the poorest of the poor become a threat to a system built on injustice, when they organize themselves and try to have a say on matters that affect their own lives.

BASIC TENETS OF THE NEW ECCLESIOLOGY

There are pastoralists and theologians who claim that the new ecclesiology in Latin America is the theological expression of the experience of the grassroots ecclesial communities. Leonardo Boff, for instance, says: 'True ecclesiology is not the result of textbook analysis or theoretical hypotheses; it comes about as a result of ecclesial practices within the institution' (1985: 1). It must be recognized that the grassroots communities do not represent a unified experience, but rather follow at least two different lines, one emphasizing the community life in small groups and another one stressing the theological and political importance of the fact that the communities are constituted by the poor (Escobar 1986: 3). According to Michael Dodson the variety of types of communities is largely due to different social contacts and political histories (1986: 88). It would therefore be more correct to say that the new ecclesiology is the ecclesiology that views the Latin American grassroots communities as the ideal model of the church, and then add that every concrete grassroots community will reflect certain characteristics of the model in varying degrees, depending on a number of factors. As a 'model', the existing grassroots communities provide reference points for theology but do not necessarily reflect all the features of the paradigm. The new ecclesiology synthesizes the most salient characteristics of the grassroots communities and at the same time fulfills an exploratory function by giving a vision of the Church as God intends it to be.² P. 342

The new ecclesiology may also be regarded as the Latin American expression of the Vatican Council II dominant model of the Church as the People of God, which saw the Church as a network of interpersonal relationships—a community. If it is true that the People of God image caused an 'ecclesiological revolution' (Dulles 1974:35), could it be that the grassroots community model is radicalizing that revolution to such an extent that nothing less than a New Church is being brought into existence, as some liberation theologians have claimed? We must heed Dulles' warning against the danger of

² I am here indebted to Avery Dulles (1974: 28–29) who makes a distinction between the explanatory and the exploratory uses of models in theology. According to him, 'Because their correspondence with the mystery of the Church is only partial and functional, models are necessarily inadequate. They illuminate certain phenomena but not others ... Pursued alone, any single model will lead to distortions. It will misplace the accent, and thus entail consequences that are not valid' (ibid.: 32). One wonders sometimes if liberation theologians are aware of the possible distortions resulting from their model of the Church as grassroots communities.

absolutizing some one model of the Church as the definitive one (ibid.: 36).³ Even so, the great prophetic power of an ecclesiology that views the grassroots community movement as 'a call to the whole church to be more evangelical, more at service, and more of the sign of that salvation that penetrates the human condition' (Boff 1985: 11) has to be fully acknowledged. The need for that will become obvious after we briefly examine the basic tenets of the new ecclesiology.

The basic question that this new ecclesiology seeks to answer is how to be the Church of Jesus Christ in the midst of poverty and oppression? More specifically, what is the mission of the Church in the Latin American situation, where the large majority of people are deprived of their humanity under a system of injustice? Quite definitely, it is a *missiological* question that emerges out of immersion in a concrete historical situation. The search is not for a new ecclesiology as a matter of academic interest, but for a way to be the Church in a world where sin has taken the shape of institutionalized violence, exploitation and marginalization. The answer to that question is spelled out in terms of a church that is, in Boff's words, 'the encounter of the community of the faithful, an encounter prompted by Christ and the Spirit to celebrate, deepen faith, and to discuss the questions of the community in the light of the Gospel' (ibid.: 155).

The basic tenets of the new ecclesiology may be synthesized under three headings: (1) the Church of the poor and from the poor; (2) the priesthood of all believers; and (3) the prophetic mission of the Church. p. 343

The Church of the Poor and from the Poor

One can hardly exaggerate the importance that the category of 'the poor' has for the new ecclesiology. Indeed, it may be said that it is the basis on which the whole ecclesial edifice rests. According to Quiroz (1983: 67–71) liberation theology views the poor as the subject or agent on three levels: historical praxis, the renewal of the Church, and theological reflection. With regard to historical praxis, says he, it has become clear that the construction of a new society can only be carried out by the oppressed themselves, starting from their values. This is not wishful thinking or a conclusion based on a socio-historical analysis, but an inference from what is actually happening: those who were 'absent from history' have come to occupy the very centre of both society and the Church. Furthermore, it makes reference to a concrete historical project having to do with a more just and fraternal society which will be a mediation of the Kingdom (ibid.: 68).

With regard to the renewal of the Church, Quiroz points out that the experience in Latin America has shown that solidarity with the poor in the struggle for liberation leads to a new way of being the Church; that from the people ('desde el pueblo') is born a Church of the people ('del pueblo'), a 'popular Church'. 'Taking root among the oppressed and marginalized classes there emerges a people of God that is a true Church of the people which enables all men to hear the gospel and becomes a sign of the liberation by the Lord of history' (ibid.: 69–70).

With regard to theological reflection, according to Quiroz, liberation theology has discovered a new hermeneutic which consists in reading Scripture 'from below', from the perspective of the poor; it has discovered that 'the poor are a privileged mediation of the

³ Boff is definitely aware of the dangers when he writes: 'The limitations of this tendency are due to its strong insistence on the structural character of social sin and on the need for an equally social and institutional grace. It runs the risk of ignoring the need for personal conversion and the search for perfection in Christian life. There is also the risk that its politics may completely hide the horizon of faith. Faith does have a political dimension and it would seem that this is the Spirit's challenge to the Church today. However, the political dimension does not cover the entire wealth of faith that must also find other expressions such as the mystical, the liturgical, and the personal within the process of integral salvation' (1985: 21).

Lord's presence' (ibid.: 70) and a means to meet him in a deeper way. For the first time in the history of the (Roman Catholic) Church in Latin America, common people are claiming their right to think and to speak, and showing that the gospel has a different sound when it is heard from 'the underside of history'.

Perhaps the best illustration of how seriously the Roman Catholic clergy in Brazil are taking the poor and the oppressed as the key to the shaping of the Church as the People of God is the 'Assembly of the People of God' in which a whole diocese meets to evaluate its progress and to make plans for the future (Libanio: 1986). Liberation theologians see that as a sign that a new day has dawned for the Church in Latin America. The basic communities are demonstrating that if the Church is to function as the People of God in a concrete way, it has to be the Church of the poor and from the poor. [p. 344](#)

Muñoz considers that it is by being among the poor and marginalized of the earth that the Church shows that Jesus Christ is its centre, for 'that is where Jesus Christ himself once became incarnate and fulfilled his ministry' (1981: 153). That means that in Latin America the Church has to change sides; it has to shift its social centre from the side of the powerful to the side of the poor, so that the latter may find their own true home in it. Does that, then, mean that the Kingdom excludes oppressors and wealthy people? It does not, says Muñoz, but 'only on the condition that they detach themselves from their wealth, stop oppressing their fellow human beings, and [quoting the *Puebla Document*, 1156] "accept and take the cause of the poor as if they were accepting and taking up their own cause, the cause of Christ himself"' (ibid.: 154–55).

It is from its concentration on the poor and the oppressed that the new ecclesiology derives its prophetic force. At the same time, however, in this emphasis lies also its greatest weakness. Why so?

The answer is that the new ecclesiology is built on the Roman Catholic assumption that the masses in Latin America are simultaneously poor and Christian. Because of that, it does not view the grassroots communities as Christian organizations functioning side by side with other popular organizations involved in the struggle for justice. Instead, it views them as Christian communities rooted in the people's movement, as ecclesial communities in which the lower classes organize themselves to be the 'historical sacrament of liberation' through which the Kingdom of God is being built (Quiroz 1983: 117–120). Quiroz goes even further and says that 'the Church which is meant to incorporate all the human race into the body of Christ, knows that it already, in a way, includes the largest part of humanity, for through their suffering and rejection the poor are actively incorporated into a universal history of salvation that has historical realizations' (ibid.: 226). Quite clearly, 'the poor' here has become a category with salvific connotations. The following questions would be in place:

In the first place, it is very difficult to avoid the suspicion that behind this way of looking at the Church there are presuppositions that belong to the 'Christian West'. Before Constantine, Christians were a minority committed to Jesus Christ, characterized by faith, hope and love. Since Constantine, all of society has been incorporated into the Church (and thus into Christ), and salvation is possible without the 'means of grace' such as the proclamation of the Gospel and Christian communion. In this context it is possible to state, as does Gutiérrez, 'that man is saved who opens himself to God and to others, even without having a [p. 345](#) clear realization of it' (1972: 196). Because, 'since God became man, humanity, every man, all of history, is the living temple of the living God' (ibid.: 250), the apostolic word according to which the explicit confession of Jesus as Lord and faith in the God who raised Him from the dead are necessary for salvation ([Rom. 10:9](#)) has ceased to be relevant. The place of faith is now occupied by historical praxis, the building of a more just society. 'To work, to transform this world,' says Guérrez, 'is to become man and to

forge the human community is also now to save' (ibid.: 210). If to this it is added that the poor are those who are making the new world, taking human destiny in history on themselves, a basis has been established to state that 'the majority of humanity' is included in salvation history. We have here what Juan R. Stumme has described as an 'inflated' concept of salvation that leaves much to be desired from an evangelical perspective (1985: 64–83).

In the second place, according to the gospel records Jesus showed special concern for the poor and conceived his mission as the ushering in of a new era in which justice would be done to them (Padilla 1985: 173–78). But, can that ever be taken to mean that God's salvation belongs to the poor, in such a way that repentance and faith are either optional or unnecessary in their case? If the poor automatically have a share in God's salvation by virtue of their poverty, does not the struggle for justice turn out to be a struggle to remove the basis for their salvation? A much more consistently biblical approach to the way in which the salvation of the Kingdom relates to the poor is needed if Jesus' call, 'Repent and believe the good news!'—a call addressed to all, rich and poor, in light of the coming of the Kingdom—is to be given full import.

In the third place, no justice is done to the teaching of the New Testament unless it is fully granted that one of the signs of the coming of the Kingdom in Jesus Christ is that 'the good news is preached to the poor' ([Lk 7:22](#), cf. 4:18). To use Raymond Fung's terminology, the gospel relates not only to human sin, but also to 'human sinned-againstness'; it 'should not only call on the people to repent of their sins, but also must call on them to resist the forces which sin against them' (1980: 332). But does that, then, mean that concern for 'human sinned-againstness' should totally replace concern for sin? If those who are 'sinned against' are by virtue of their suffering and oppression incorporated into the body of Christ, does not the struggle for justice turn out to be a struggle to remove the basis for their inclusion in the Church? A much more consistently biblical approach to the way in which the Church relates to the 'sinned against' is needed if the [p. 346](#) Church is to be the community of forgiven sinners as well as of the poor, the family of God as well as from the poor.

The Priesthood of All Believers

Of all the emphases of the new ecclesiology, perhaps none has such far reaching consequences for the life and mission of the Church as the emphasis on the priesthood of all believers. At the same time, such a development has become the most difficult problem that the Vatican has to face in relation to the so-called 'popular church', as evidenced by the discipline measures taken in 1985 against Leonardo Boff, the author of *Church, Charisma and Power*.

Already at the second General Assembly of the Latin American Episcopal Conference in 1968 the intention had been expressed 'to renew and to create new church structures in order to institutionalize dialogue and to channel co-operation between bishops, priests and lay persons' (*Mensaje a los pueblos*). This interest in lay persons had been encouraged by the ecclesiology of Vatican II, which, in contrast with traditional doctrine, had underlined the communal and charismatic rather than the hierarchical and institutional aspects of the Church. It is now generally agreed, however, that Vatican II failed to draw the practical consequences of this ecclesiology, especially with regard to the distribution of power within the Church. If all Christians are equal members in the body of Christ, how should the Church be structured so that all its members exercise their ministries and have a share in the authority of the Church?

This question that Vatican II left unanswered has been taken up by the new ecclesiology in Latin America as one of its main concerns over against a Church in which

the clergy has monopolized the power while the laity has no significant role to fulfill. And the results are indeed revolutionary.

Shortly before Leonardo Boff was called to Rome to respond to the charges made against him by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, this organism—the successor of the Inquisition—published its *Instruction on Some Aspects of the Theology of Liberation*, in which certain aspects of this theology, especially its use of Marxist categories in the analysis of socioeconomic and political reality were specifically rejected. The Instruction was merely the last link in a chain of measures taken to repress this polemical ‘new way of doing theology’ that has developed in Latin America. There are, however, weighty reasons to believe that the real issue that led the Vatican to punish Boff p. 347 was his position with regard to the matter at hand, which he has summarized as follows:

The mission of the People of God is not entrusted only to a few but is given to all, sacred power is, initially, held by everyone and only later is held by sacred ministers. All are sent out to proclaim the good news about the bright future of history and about the meaning of the world already won and anticipated by the resurrection that makes Jesus’ utopia about the Kingdom real and concrete. (1985: 155)

In the opening chapter of his book (‘Models and Pastoral Practices of the Church’) Boff criticizes the ‘essentially clerical’ view of the Church, according to which ‘without the clergy nothing decisive can happen within the community’ (ibid.: 3); the view of the Church as ‘mater and magistra’ (mother and teacher) ‘founded upon priestly and magisterial power as well as the sacred authority of the hierarchy’ (ibid.: 5), and the view of the Church as ‘sacramentum salutis’ (sacrament of salvation) of Vatican II, which was reformist for it failed to demand ‘another type of society but rather sought greater participation of all in the modern liberal system of advanced technological capitalism’ (ibid.: 6). In contrast with these models he proposes a new one: the Church of the poor and with the poor that allows ‘new ministries and a new style of religious life incarnated in the life of the people’ (ibid.: 10). To Boff this Church model opens a new path for the Church, in which the poor themselves ‘will decide the shape of future society’ (ibid.: 11); it is, therefore, the way for the Church to respond to the demands of history.

In the succeeding chapters Boff elaborates further this vision of the Church as a fraternal community in which human dignity is respected regardless of social class, authoritarianism is eliminated, and every member of the Church counts. To him the Church is not primarily a hierarchical institution. It is, rather, ‘a sacrament of the Holy Spirit’ founded by Christ and his apostles and led by the Holy Spirit to be the People of God, ‘a Church that ministers’ and ‘fosters unity from its mission of liberation’, a Church where the gifts of the Spirit, given to all the members become ‘the organizing principle’ (ibid.: 117–23). In this Church, there is a recovery of the true meaning of *potestas sacra* within the Church; the hierarchy ceases to be an ontological stratum—an elite that holds all the sacred power and marginalizes the large majority of members, who are lay persons—and becomes servant to the needs of the community. Boff believes that the model of the Church as a ‘power institution’ is outdated; that a new reading of Scripture is needed, not one based on criteria dictated by power, but p. 348 one that takes love as its starting point and assumes that those who represent Christ and his authority must be servants, even as he himself was.

What we have here is nothing less than a ‘Copernican revolution’ that, if allowed to continue, could totally transform the Roman Catholic Church from a power structure centred in Rome into a network of local communities centred in the Lord Jesus Christ, the

powerless One who gave his life for the salvation of the world. Over four centuries ago, Martin Luther wrote:

All Christians belong to the priesthood and there is no difference among them except in terms of ministry. As Paul says, we all are one body, but each member has his own function with which he serves the rest. This is due to the fact that we have one baptism, one gospel, one faith and are all equal Christians, since baptism, the gospel and faith are sufficient to make Christians a nation of priests.⁴

The new ecclesiology in Latin America is discovering the transforming power of this biblical insight that lay at the basis of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation: the priesthood of all believers. The big question is whether Rome will allow Charisma to follow its course, or whether it will, once again, choose Power.

The Prophetic Mission of the Church

Closely connected with the two previous emphases in the new ecclesiology is its stress on the prophetic mission of the Church. If the Church is of the poor and from the poor, and if all its members have been given gifts for a variety of ministries, then it is only natural to expect that in its mission the Church will seek to relate faith to such problems as injustice and poverty, oppression and marginalization. According to Boff, the Church institutions and officials are of service to the Church and world if they favour the fulfilment of this prophetic mission; otherwise they become a fortress for conservative politics and instruments of the oppressive powers.

In line with this emphasis on the prophetic mission of the Church, the new ecclesiology encourages (1) the study of Scripture 'from below' for the purpose of socioeconomic and political conscientization, and (2) the development of links between the grassroots communities and the popular movements and organizations. In Libanio's words, p. 349

The BECs (Basic Ecclesial Communities) can be born from a spiritual, or even a traditional activity, or from community action or popular struggle. But 'their fundamental characteristic is that they never lose either one of the two dimensions.' They are both linked in a profound unity.

The BECs are the Word of God linked to life, to work. They are evangelization and social reality; faith and the popular struggle. (1986: 9).

At a meeting of local pastoral practitioners from grassroots communities in a sector of Sao Paulo, Brazil, some time ago three types of Church activity in the region were identified, each of them with a distinct outlook on the relationship between faith and politics: the conservative Church (for which faith and politics are in competition with each other), the renewed Church (for which faith and politics follow parallel lines) and the socially-committed Church (for which faith and politics are inseparable realities) (O'Gorman 1986: 15). Needless to say, the grassroots communities are seen as belonging to the third category. They take it for granted that 'the ecclesial life embraces a commitment to movements of the marginalized poor' and therefore, helps people in their organization within the neighbourhood, the school, the trade union and so on. Mission is wherever there is need to re-create relationship within the structures that make up society, through 'prophetic denunciation and justice guided construction' (ibid.).

⁴ This is a free translation from the Spanish version of Luther's essay *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Regarding the Betterment of the Christian Estate* (1520).

This view of the mission of the Church is possible because the Church is seen against the background of the Kingdom of God and all humanity. As Rolando Muñoz has put it, 'The Church is essentially eccentric, in the sense that it does not exist for itself ... The Church exists for the world, for service to human beings. More specifically, the Church exists to serve human beings for the sake of the kingdom of God' (1981: 151). When the Church finds its centre in the Kingdom, it is delivered from itself and released for service to people in their concrete situation. It is free for mission.

The concern to keep faith and life together in the grassroots communities is translated into sociopolitical involvement 'from bottom up'. The effects that this kind of involvement may have on the macro-structures must not be over-estimated, but they have been significant enough to prod the conscience of those who have institutional power and to make a difference for life at the local level.

A question raised by the sociopolitical involvement of the grassroots communities is whether that involvement does not entail a politicization of the faith which undermines the Christian witness. The liberation theologians co-operating with the grassroots communities seem to be aware of the problem. Libanio, for instance, writes: [p. 350](#)

A truly pastoral concern will attempt to avoid two extremes which are harmful for the life of the Church: a conservative resistance to political things and the tendency to politicize everything ... We cannot shy away from a political commitment. But, at the same time, we should hold back from such a total involvement in politics that we lose our religious and ecclesial identity. (1986: 10; see also note 3)

Without denying the great potential that the grassroots community movement has as a political force working for change, the fact remains that at least in Latin America its effectiveness in the future will to a great extent depend on how well they succeed in maintaining their ecclesiality rooted in Scripture, without being co-opted either by the power structures of the Church or by a political ideology.

THE CHALLENGE OF THE NEW ECCLESIOLOGY

That a new Church is taking shape in the grassroots ecclesial communities can hardly be denied. Rooted in it, the new ecclesiology has become the most powerful challenge to Protestant Christians in this region of the world, and it may well become the most powerful challenge to the Church of Jesus Christ everywhere else in the next few years. The challenge is threefold: social, ministerial and missional.

The Social Challenge

Anyone familiar with Protestantism in Latin America knows that a very high percentage of Protestant Christians in this continent are poor people. As Sywulka has put it, 'Evangelicals have been "base" and abased from the beginning. They have been historically, and vast numbers still are, the poor and powerless, the alienated and marginalized' (1986: 29). Does it follow that Protestants have no reason to get excited about 'a preferential option for the poor' for they are poor? One cannot answer this question positively without ignoring the problems that the values of the consumer society poses to the Church in Latin America and everywhere else today. Sad to say, a high percentage of Protestant churches made up of poor and oppressed people are locked into a value system which conditions them to be far more interested in social respectability and influence than in faithfulness to the gospel. Christianity is thus turned into a means to accommodate to the status quo, the biblical message is domesticated, and the Church becomes a fortress of conservative politics, oblivious of the needs of the poor and the

oppressed. As Cook has shown, most Protestant churches today fear the kind of movement that gave them p. 351 birth or revitalized them along the way; the grassroots communities challenge them to go back to their own historical roots (1985:230–1).

The new ecclesiology is a call for us to take the poor seriously. That does not mean that we are to neglect the proclamation of forgiveness of sin through the atoning death of Jesus Christ. It does mean that we have to acknowledge that the poor are not only sinners but also sinned-against, deprived of basic material needs and human rights. As Fung has put it, 'The most dwelt-upon methods of evangelism today—personal evangelism and mass evangelism—are futile among the poor because, among many other reasons, both presuppose a receiving community which is not available to the poor in most of our existing churches today' (1980: 336). The challenge is to be the kind of Church community which is so loving, open and available to the poor that no-one ever feels neglected or marginalized. 'Anyone who does not love the alienated and the abandoned with an operative liberating love does not, in fact, believe in the gospel of God's love and does not love God' (Barreiro 1982: 33–34).

No one can tell what may happen to a traditional church when it makes itself available to the poor and marginalized in society. My own church was turned inside out a few years ago as a result of the incoming of a group of young men and women affected by drug addiction. Their presence in our midst forced us to re-examine our life and mission as we had never done before. We were a denominational, rather small church in a middle-class suburb of Buenos Aires. Then the unexpected took place—an influx of drug addicts looking for restoration and help. What were we to do? One of the leaders of the church suggested that the help given them should be restricted to holding a special weekly meeting for them, so they could hear the gospel and 'get saved'. By God's grace, we chose the way of the cross and little by little learned that the Church is for sinners and the sinned-against. And that was the beginning of radical change in our attitudes and values and priorities as well as in our structures and methods and programmes. In a true sense, the drug addicts—the poor the God had put in our midst—became God's call to conversion to the gospel of the Kingdom which is a gospel of holistic transformation. Perhaps this is what is meant when it is said that the poor evangelize the Church.

The Ministerial Challenge

One of the secrets of the fantastic numerical growth of Pentecostal churches in Latin America is undoubtedly their emphasis on lay leadership. With little or no theological training, Pentecostal men and p. 352 women are ordained as church ministers. The priesthood of all believers is thus not an abstract principle but a living reality without which Pentecostalism can hardly be explained.

From the perspective of the new ecclesiology, however, the priesthood of all believers takes on a wider and deeper meaning than in Pentecostalism, for it looks at the Church in light of the Kingdom of God. As Quiroz has put it, 'The aim of the ministries and charismas that emerge because the Church exists is that the Church may continue to serve the Kingdom' (1983: 280). If the Church is to serve the Kingdom, and if the Kingdom includes the totality of life, then the Spirit has to equip the Church with a multiplicity of gifts related to all dimensions of life. This he does, according to the new ecclesiology, and is being experienced within the grassroots communities in their struggle for liberation and justice. The grassroots communities have lifted up the lay person as 'a bearer of ecclesial values, either as a coordinator or monitor of the community, or as one engaged in several community services' (Boff 1979: 49).

The rediscovery of the priesthood of all the members of the People of God challenges us at least on three levels. On the ecclesiastical level, the new ecclesiology calls our

attention to the dangers of the clericalism that is affecting many Protestant churches on our continent. While the traditional dichotomy between the *status clericalis* and the *status laicalis* of the Canon Law of the Catholic Church is losing strength in the base communities, in these Protestant churches there is increasing emphasis on the idea that evangelization is the task of evangelists and other communicators who specialize in the use of radio and television, not the responsibility of all believers. While charismatic gifts are adopted as the basis of organization in the base communities and priority is given to the fulfilment of the mission in the world, in these churches the institutionalization of the 'ordained ministry' is promoted and the ministry of 'lay people' increasingly restricted. The rediscovery of the missionary character of the whole Church is urgently needed.

On the hermeneutical level, the new ecclesiology invites us to read the Bible 'from below' (if we can!) and re-examine the role of the grassroots members of our congregations in discerning the link between faith and life in their concrete historical situation. If the Gospel is going to be firmly rooted among the poorest sectors of the population, we cannot be satisfied with the numerical expansion of Protestant churches in these sectors. As the final document on *New Alternatives for Theological Education* by the Latin American Theological Fraternity states: [p. 353](#)

All members of the Church need an integrated understanding of its mission and the motivation for actively participating in it. All have received gifts and ministries which they ought to discover and develop in service to God and to their neighbours. Everyone needs theological education and the possibility of being involved in theological work. From this perspective, churches will complete their teaching task to the measure that, on their own or in co-operation with others in the same area or city, they establish programmes that help all their members to discover and exercise their gifts in the development of different ministries. (Padilla 1986:132)

On the vocational level, the new ecclesiology challenges us to broaden our concept of ministry to include the whole range of activities that the People of God carry out by the power of the Spirit in their service to Christ. Something is wrong when the only ministries recognized as such are the pastorate and preaching! God can be served also in the shop, the office, the university, the factory, the labour union, the laboratory ... In Protestant circles it is necessary to recover the ministerial significance of professions and trades in every area of human activity.

The Missional Challenge

In the last twenty years there has been a real awakening of a social conscience among evangelicals all over the world. To many of us, there is no question that the spiritual and the material, the personal and the social, word and deed, the proclamation of justification by faith and the struggle for justice belong together. And yet, how much do our churches really know in their concrete experience the meaning of the kingly, priestly and prophetic ministries that we have received from Christ? As Cook has put it, summarizing a section of his doctoral dissertation,

Turning upside down the logic of Temple Judaism and of the present-day institutionalized Church, Jesus showed us that to be kingly is to serve ([Mk. 10:42-45](#)), to be priestly is to give away one's life for others ([Heb. 7:26-27](#)), and to be prophetic is to become incarnate in the world to which we have been sent as God's witnesses ([Jn. 1:14](#)). (1986: 6)

The new ecclesiology in Latin America challenges us to leave the strongholds of our institutions and become involved in the adventure of Jesus' kingly, priestly and prophetic mission in solidarity with the poor.

The task that we have before us is not one that we can carry out in isolation from our local churches. It has to do with God's purpose to unify the human race and to restore his domination in all dimensions p.354 of life and over the totality of creation. In other words, it has to do with his Kingdom. The new ecclesiology, rooted in the experience of the grassroots ecclesial communities, reminds us that the place to begin is the local church, a community of priests called to a prophetic mission.

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Can the West be Converted?

Lesslie Newbigin

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It is now a truism to assert the neo-paganism of the West. Newbigin analyzes the fundamental characteristics of Western culture; in conclusion he gives a very practical six-step suggestion as to how the West be re-Christianized.

Editor

Let me begin by confessing that my title is a borrowed one. A dozen years ago, at the Bangkok Conference on 'Salvation Today', I happened to be sitting next to General Simatupang, that doughty Indonesian Christian who, having driven the Dutch out of his islands, turned to theology as the most agreeable field for the exercise of the arts of war. We were in plenary debate, and Simatupang had just made an intervention. As he returned to his seat beside me, I heard him say under his breath: 'Of course, the Number One question is, Can the West be converted?'

In the following years I have become more and more sure that he was right. If one looks at the world scene from a missionary point of view, surely the most striking fact is that, while in great areas of Asia and Africa the church is growing, often growing rapidly, in the lands which were once called Christendom it is in decline; and, moreover, wherever the culture of the West, under the name of 'modernization', penetrates, it carries with it what Lippmann called 'the acids of modernity', dissolving the most enduring of religious beliefs including the beliefs of Christians. Surely there can be no more crucial question for the world mission of the church than the one I have posed. Can there be an effective missionary encounter with *this* culture—this so powerful, persuasive, and confident culture which (at least until very recently) simply regarded itself as 'the coming world civilization'. Can the West be converted?

I am posing this question at a time when, especially in evangelical circles, great attention is being paid to the question of gospel and culture, to the question of the contextualization of the gospel in different cultures. Recent missionary literature is full of the subject. 'Contextualization' is an ugly word but a useful one. It is better than the word long used by Protestants—'indigenization'—which always tended to direct attention to