

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 16

Volume 16 • Number 3 • July 1992

Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from
publications worldwide for an international
readership for the purpose of discerning the
obedience of faith*

EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS

Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS



Cde, J. (1990) 'Women under SAP' *NewsWatch* 12, No. 2:38–40.
 Ogbuagu, S. C. (1990) Worsening Economic Crisis: The Effects of Selected Government Policies and Programmes on Rural Women in Nigeria, 1985–1990.
 OXFAM's Gender and Development Unit *GADU* Newspank No. 13, 1991.
 Scobie, A. (1960) *Women of Africa*, London, Cassella Co. Ltd.
 World Council of Churches *Decade Link*.
 West African Consultation on Ecumenical Decade, No. 5, December 1989.
 World Council of Churches' *Women in a Changing World* No. 27 and 28, 1989. p. 250
 Williams, G. A. (1990) *The Contributions of Women to National Development: Education*. Lagos: The Nigerian Association of University Women, p. 13.
Women in Nigeria (WIN) Document 1989.
Women of Africa Speak Out. Regional Consultation on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation. Legos, Ghana 27 March–2 April 1989.
Women Under Racism. A Decade of Visible Action. Geneva: PCR Information 1990.

Dr. Daisy N. Nwachuku is Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Education, University of Calabar, Nigeria. p. 251

Seeing, Judging and Acting: Evangelism in Jesus' Way according to John 9

Guillermo Cook

In June 1979 I returned to Costa Rica to work with CELEP, the Latin American Evangelical Centre for Pastoral Studies, after several years of ministry in Brazil. The CELEP Board and Staff met at the Methodist Centre in Alajuela to evaluate their work and to plan for the future. I had just been named Assistant to the General Director, Orlando Costas, and he had asked me to lead one of the devotional sessions. I remember quite well the text I chose ([John 9:16](#)) 'Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." But others asked, "How can a sinner do such miraculous signs?" So they were divided' (NIV). Just a day or two earlier, in my private devotions, I had noticed an interesting fact in a text I had read perhaps a hundred times before.

The Pharisees were divided into two groups. The group which obviously made up the majority judged the healing of the blind man from birth on the basis of their legalistic doctrine and condemned Jesus. What was probably a minority group, judging from the final outcome, judged the event on the basis of the deed itself, from its *praxis*, and refused to be rushed into making a negative verdict. Throughout history there have been two ways of evaluating the Church's actions, and of those who profess the Name of Jesus Christ. The 'top down' (or deductive) approach is to take refuge in the safety of doctrinal propositions. But working 'from the bottom up', one starts from a concrete situation and works inductively toward what may turn out to be a risky and potentially controversial conclusion. This qualitative difference in interpretation has always divided the Church, and accounts for most heresies. As a matter of fact, the division is false, because theory and practice are inseparable and should always be maintained in dynamic tension.

Because of the positive response from my CELEP teammates on that occasion long ago, I felt motivated to study the entire chapter within its own context. Over the years I have had the opportunity to exegete the chapter and to preach and teach from it in an expository way. What [p. 252](#) follows is an attempt to set down more formally my reflections on [John 9](#). I do so in memory of my dear brother, mentor and former colleague in ministry, Orlando Enrique Costas. For it was he who encouraged me to pursue doctoral studies and who inspired me to interpret the Word of God from a missiological and pastoral¹ point of view, with Latin America as my starting point.

THE GENERAL CONTEXT OF THE PASSAGE

Compared to the other Evangelists, John is rather sparing with his narratives about Jesus's ministry. We can be fairly certain that he has not recorded this unique story simply to add an account of Jesus' healing power which did not appear in the Synoptics. Above all, the Apostle seems to have had a pedagogical reason for giving us his Gospel, and this dramatic story: he wanted to confront doctrinal and practical problems that were beginning to vex the Asian churches toward the end of the first century. As is well known, dualistic heresies were placing either the humanity or the divinity of Jesus in doubt. Above all, gnosticism in its various forms was propounding esoteric theories whose symbols were truth and falsehood, light and darkness. John confronts these heresies throughout the entire Gospel by giving new and liberating meaning to the symbolic language of the gnostics.

[John 9](#) presents a multifaceted incident the purpose of which is to emphasise both Jesus' divinity and humanity. He presents seven interconnected dialogues—confrontations or crises—that are different responses to the evangelistic action of Jesus. Underlying each encounter is a fundamental question: What is *truth* and what is *falsehood*? And how can one really *know*, that is, discern between the two? Basically, this story is a kind of parable about 'walking in the light' as opposed to being 'in darkness'—two sides of an important theme in John's writings.

John's narrative method could not be more radical. He introduces us to a Jesus who raises difficult issues concerning the basic attitudes of satisfied professional religionists. Yet Jesus is not the principal character in this story. He appears only in the Prologue and the Epilogue, setting [p. 253](#) the stage and then presenting the moral conclusions of the drama, as in a Greek play. John shows us how an 'ordinary' or 'common' believer—poor, physically disabled, illiterate and barred from the fellowship of his religion—is capable of judging and confounding the knowledge of sophisticated theologians. This has a lot of significance for us today, when many of our own presuppositions are being challenged by the poor and dispossessed. We are also living in an era when 'First World' missions are being called into question by the Two-Thirds World.

'Seeing, judging and acting' became known a decade or two ago as a Catholic Action method of analysis to be applied to social and historical phenomena, and the Church's response to them. Without losing sight of its original purpose, I propose to use this method as a paradigm for effective evangelization. Simply put, we will attempt to discover how each one of the actors in this unique story *see*, *judge*, and *act* when faced with the need of a wretched human being and with the indisputable act of his healing by Jesus. In this study, *seeing*, *judging*, and *acting* will be related, respectively, to the kerygmatic dimensions of proclamation, judgment, and commitment to a specific mode of action.

¹ The term *pastoral* in Latin America is used not as a static adjective denoting a professional action, but as a dynamic noun/adjective. E. Costas defined 'pastoral' as 'everything that the church does on behalf of the world in the name of Jesus Christ.'

Seeing has to do with our perception of the divine revelation, in the person of Jesus Christ and in those in whom He chooses to be manifest. *Judging* in this passage has the sense of *krisis*, or *krima*, Greek cognates whose roots communicate the idea of sifting, of provoking a profound re-evaluation of our fond presuppositions, of confronting us with radical new options. Evangelism in Jesus' way brings about crisis, shakes things up, corrects our errors, refutes our false assumptions, illuminates contradictions. Jesus Christ forces us to take positions. *Judging* is the axis around which both seeing and acting turn. To judge without then acting is like being suspended in a hot air balloon, above the fray. *Acting* requires making choices. It is to commit oneself to Jesus Christ and to His mission, or to turn one's back on Him.

With these criteria in mind, let us analyze the passage. The text we shall use is the New International Version.

THE FIRST CRISIS: A THEORETICAL PROBLEM VS A CHALLENGE TO ACTION (Vv. 1-7)

'As he went along, he [Jesus] saw a man blind from his birth.' Jesus *saw* (that is looked with attention at) a man who was considered to be less than a full person by the religious people of his day. In some cases, he P. 254 was excluded from the blessings of the Covenant. The disciples however, instead of seeing a needy person, look upon him as a mere object of curiosity and of theological speculation. They pose a problem to Jesus: 'Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Their question neatly avoids the main issue before them. It is another way of posing the question of the lawyer in [Lk. 10:29](#): 'Who is my neighbour?'. Today Christians avoid commitment when they ask such questions as, 'Who are the poor?', or 'What comes first, evangelism or social action?' Theological discussions abstract the problems that surround us at every turn and they allow us to evade the responsibility of an authentic commitment to people in need. Because the disciples could not see, they judged the situation poorly, and in consequence, lost the opportunity of acting.

Jesus, however, focuses his disciples' attention on the real issue. The blind man is before them to be served, and so that God's will might be manifest in him. Now, while it is yet day, it is necessary to do the work of God, because at night one cannot work. It is significant that the account begins with a juxtaposition of light and darkness: 'While I am in the world, I am the light of the world,' says Jesus. It is here that we find the purpose of this story: to clear away the darkness of falsehood and to illuminate our hearts with the truth of God. Here and in the rest of this passage we shall see that the persons who are the most in need of God's light are those who profess to be His followers! It is a humbling thought.

Our Lord immediately acts in response to the blind man's needs. But he resorts to a practice which, from our perspective, might seem rather unsanitary, not to say repugnant. This is not the first time that Jesus mixes dirt and his saliva to make mud to anoint the eyes of a blind person ([Mk. 8:22, 23](#)). He did the same thing with the tongue of a deaf-mute ([Mk. 7:33](#)). Why did Jesus do this? We can only speculate. But it was a method which was used by popular healers in His day. In antiquity it was believed, not without reason, that saliva had curative powers (although rabbinic writers also pronounced saliva impure). In this way Jesus identifies with the popular culture and confronts the religious culture of His day. Without having to do so, He communicates His love through the vehicle of popular medicine. At the same time, he identifies Himself gratuitously with Jewish ceremonial practices when He sends the blind man to the pool of Siloam, whose waters were used for purification rites. He does not reject the customs of the common people. Instead, He

transforms them into instruments of His love. What does this have to say to our own attitudes toward the ‘superstitious’ beliefs of the people to whom we witness? [p. 255](#)

THE SECOND CRISIS: INDECISION VS INTEGRITY (VV. 8–13)

A life transformed by God is worth more than a thousand evangelistic sermons. The former blind man is now at centre stage and the object of many questions. Are you or are you not the same man whom we knew before, the one who begged by the side of the road? Who healed you? Interestingly enough, the man’s reply hinges entirely on actions and not at all on speculations. ‘The man they *call* Jesus *made* some mud and *put* it on my eyes. He *told* me to *go* to Siloam and *wash*. So I *went* and *washed*, and then I *could see*’. This verb-filled explanation is graphic and descriptive. These are the words of a simple man, unaccustomed to speculation, whose life is measured in terms of actions and their consequences. Yet, though his neighbours saw the evidence of a changed life before them, not all of them believed, perhaps because they were blinded by their religious presuppositions. The presence of a once blind man in their midst has become a matter of judgement, that is of crisis. But their action is inconclusive because of their fear of the religious authorities, to whom they will now turn over their neighbour.

THE THIRD CRISIS: SABBATH AND SHALOM (VV. 14–17)

In God’s plan the Sabbath and the Shalom are inseparable. The Sabbath was more than a weekly day off from work. It was meant to be rest for God’s entire creation—His people, the animals and the land. The Jubilee Year—liberty to the captives and lands returned to their original owners—was intended to communicate Shalom in the realms of work, natural resource conservation and of social relations, as well as at the level of our relationship to God. These are all anticipations of the Shalom of the Kingdom, which is peace, well-being, health and salvation. The sabbatical law, however, was never truly observed according to the divine intention. Because of her rebellion, Israel never entered into the rest of Shalom ([Heb. 3:11](#), [18](#) & [4:1–11](#)). Instead of being a double symbol of integral liberation, the Sabbath and the Shalom were in crisis—that is in contradiction—in Jesus’ time.

Let us return to the hero of our story. He is totally alone. Jesus and His disciples have left him. His neighbours have thrown him to the religious wolves. Yet, alone though he is, our man has become a stumbling block, a sign of *krisis* to everyone around him. In this brief section we find the key focuses of attention which give meaning to the [p. 256](#) entire story. As we saw at the beginning, the Pharisees are divided between theory and practice. Both they and the disciples are faced with only two options: their own doctrinal-cultural tradition or the well-being (Shalom) of a needy person.

Today throughout the world evangelism is poised between these two poles. For the Pharisees the problem is the Sabbath. It is more than a day of rest. It is their entire value system, on which hinges their religious beliefs, status, and division of labour, which they themselves control. The Pharisees cannot permit their tradition to be broken for the simple reason that they cannot afford to lose their control over the minds and hearts of the people.

The majority faction of the Pharisees, therefore, are not looking at a person who has just been healed. Rather, they perceive a threat to the integrity of the law (their traditions) and to their own authority. So they question the blind man repeatedly about what has

happened to him. They are seeking to confuse him, but he doesn't fall into their trap, which frustrates them all the more. Significantly, the once blind man's first answer to his inquisitors is much more brief than that which he shared with his neighbours. It is an attitude of awe which is proper for an unlettered person who feels uncomfortable in the presence of the heavy hand of the law. It is at this point that division arises in the heart of the Council. We find here the same contradictions between theory and practice with which we began this study. A majority of the religious leaders base their conclusions upon tried and true doctrinal presuppositions ('This man is not from God for he does not keep the Sabbath', v. [16a](#)). Meanwhile, a minority starts from the fact of the healing and works back inductively to the proposition, 'How can a sinner do such miraculous signs?' (v. [16b](#)).

When the ex-blind man responds to a second interrogation, he makes a daring judgement about the identity of his benefactor. 'He is a prophet', he states. This does not satisfy the Pharisees. Their theory forces them to declare that the Healer is an imposter and the healing a hoax. So they now turn to the man's parents in the hope of finding a way out. But this is not to be.

THE FOURTH CRISIS: STATUS VS SOLIDARITY (VV. 18-23)

The parents' testimony on behalf of their son was indispensable if the Pharisees were to accept or reject out of hand the transformation in the life of the blind man. Nevertheless, even though the parents have [P. 257](#) before them irrefutable proof of the work of God in their son's body, he is also for them a sign of contradiction—of crisis—so they neatly pass the buck. Such is the absolute power of their religious tradition that they judge it more important to maintain their status within the synagogue than to demonstrate practical solidarity with their own son. How did he receive his sight? Ask him! He is of age.

THE FIFTH CRISIS: TRADITION VS WITNESS (V. 34)

The inquest begins again. The time for a pious verdict has arrived. 'Give glory to God; we know this man is a sinner.' Period. Tradition, with all of the weight of the law behind it has given its verdict. There is nothing more to say, or so the Pharisees believe. But our man certainly has much to say. He refuses to be cowed. Surprisingly, he has lost his timidity, because he has a vital testimony to share. 'Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know (I am not a theologian like you folk). One thing I do know. I was blind, but now I see!' Period. The crisis has come to a head. An irresistible force faces an immovable object. Who will yield? It seems that neither of the two will.

Momentarily taken aback, the Pharisees counter attack. Holy tradition cannot allow itself to be defeated. So they repeat their interrogation, doubtless hoping to catch him in an incriminating contradiction. But the once blind man does not let himself be frightened. Much to the contrary. This simple and illiterate man loses patience with the learned doctors of the law. He answers them with more than a tinge of irony: 'I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?'

What an interesting spectacle! These proud religious leaders lose their tempers. They are reduced to insults, a weapon of desperation (they would act worse later, spitting on and slapping the Master). They brag like little boys in a schoolyard. 'You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses!' (or perhaps today of the four Johns—the Baptist, Calvin, Wesley, Wimber?). 'We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we

don't even know where he comes from.' Pedigree, it seems, and theological credentials were the name of the game even in Jesus' day!

At that crucial moment the man who had been blind demonstrates unexpected qualities. He is both stubborn and a competent theologian—as every Christian can be who has to defend his faith in the face of the sceptics. While the editorial hand of the Evangelist is probably in [p. 258](#) evidence in this passage, here we have an example of what has been rightly called 'the wisdom of the people'. Listen to him! 'Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that He doesn't listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does His will. nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this were not from God, he could do nothing' (vv. 30–33). The man who at first must have felt incapable of getting involved in theological speculations (v. 25) ends up by making a masterful defence of the person and mission of Jesus. On the other hand, the Pharisees, their religious pride wounded, and concerned about maintaining their authority, can find no alternative left to them but to get rid of the once blind man. 'Correct doctrine' is incapable of accepting an evident fact that contradicts its 'assured propositions.'

Let us pause briefly to review the plot of this drama from two diametrically opposed points of view. From their positions of high authority, the Pharisees haughtily saw, judged, and acted, driven by the logic of death. First they attempted to undermine *the fact* of the blind man's healing. When their scheme failed, they tried to discredit the author of the miracle. When all of this proved to be to no avail, they were forced to get rid of the person who was healed. Progressively and inevitably, the religious leaders of Judah rejected the healing, the healer and the healed. This is the road that is always followed by religious people who refuse to recognise the work of God when it threatens their interests and contradicts their iron-bound presuppositions. When the logic of life confronts victoriously the logic of death, the lords of death have no other recourse than to get rid of those who personify life. The rejection was total and eloquent. 'You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!' And they threw him out of the synagogue (he had barely attained the right to be readmitted after his healing, and now he is cast out!) In the religious culture of his day, this was a form of assassination. For them the blind man had ceased to exist. He was worthless. The scum of the earth. Organized religion has robbed this poor man of his personhood, making him officially less than human.

On the other hand, from what has been called 'the underside of history,' a powerless person was growing in courage and in his capacity to reflect and to respond courageously. His straightforward theology flowed naturally from his own life experience with Jesus Christ, and not the other way around, as is the case with much of our doctrine today. He having confused his accusers and wounded their pride, they had no other alternative but to get rid of him. [p. 259](#)

THE SIXTH CRISIS: DEHUMANIZATION VS HUMANIZATION (VV. 35–38)

Just at the moment when our man is totally rejected—by his neighbours, his parents, the religious establishment—Jesus reappears on the scene, ready to act in his favour. Although for the Pharisees this man is unimportant (he is sub-human), Jesus gives him back his humanity when He makes him the centre of all His attention. He searches him out and He challenges him. 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' Moving beyond the theological content of the question we have to discern a profound communications event. In Jesus's question there is acceptance of this man's humanity, of his inherent capacity to launch upon the adventure of faith. In fact, the very 'abandonment' of the blind man by Jesus is,

at the heart, a recognition of his value as a human being—of the possibilities for spiritual maturation and theological reflection that are in him as a creature of God.

How different is the once blind man's attitude towards Jesus from that of the other actors in this story! His reply to the challenge of Jesus Christ is characterized by simplicity, worship and faith. 'Tell me so that I might believe in Him.' It is as if he were saying: 'You do not have to make a theological exposition, Master I don't need an explanation about the identity of the Son of Man, based upon Ezekiel and Daniel. I will believe in Him if you tell me who He is.' Even though it is unspectacular, the self-revelation of Jesus to the man born blind is worthy of comparison with the epiphany of the Burning Bush and with the manifestations of the risen Christ. 'You have seen him'. (How and when, Lord? Didn't you leave before I recovered my sight?) In fact, he is the one speaking with you.' Jesus revealed Himself as the Christ, the anointed of God, to a person who not long before had been thrown into the trash bin of history, as far as the Jewish leaders were concerned. Kneeling before Christ, the man exclaims, 'Lord, I believe.'

The story could have ended here. Jesus has *seen* the blind man. He has *judged* his situation, and has *acted* in his favour. One more person has been incorporated into the kingdom of God. Jesus' evangelistic method has proved to be a success. Nevertheless, this is not the end of the story. Our Lord has yet a lesson to teach to the religious leaders. Because, as Plutarco Bonilla has said, 'The miracles [of Jesus] are also parables.'

THE SEVENTH CRISIS: THE TABLES ARE TURNED (VV. 38–41)

Jesus throws down the gauntlet. 'For judgment (*krima*) I have come **P. 260** into this world.' At the beginning of the account Jesus had declared to His disciples, 'While I am in the world, I am the light of the world' (v. **5**). Now He is saying that this light is more than mere illumination. It is crisis; it is judgment, which at one and the same time dissipates the darkness of ignorance and blinds with its brilliance those who think they can see. 'I have come ... so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind' (v. **39**).

The Pharisees, who follow Jesus' every move, rightly guess that He is alluding to them. 'What? Are we blind too?' Jesus's answer is sharp and to the point. In effect, He is saying to them, if the shoe fits, gentlemen, put it on! 'If you were blind [i.e., if you could not recognise this fact], you would not be guilty of sin'. But because the Pharisees say that they see, they are therefore guilty. Jesus has dramatically turned the tables on them. The blind man sees clearly the will of God, while those who believe themselves to be fully gifted with sight (because of their religious knowledge or ecclesiastical position) are the ones who are truly blind. As the saying goes, 'There is none so blind as he who will not see.' The sins of the man who had been born blind have been forgiven. The real sinners are the Pharisees because they are blinded to the work of God. The one who was blind has been received into God's Kingdom, while the religious leaders, quite clearly, are excluded, if not from the synagogue, from the Shalom of God.

It is not by chance nor by coincidence that, immediately after this account, John transcribes the words of Jesus: 'I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep ... The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep' (**In. 10:1, 2, 10, 11**). Chapter **10** is, in a sense, a commentary upon chapter **9**.

There is no doubt as to who are the false shepherds and who is the Good Shepherd in this narrative. In **Ezekiel 34** the prophet describes with a wealth of detail the practices of death of the false shepherds and issues judgment against them. The promise of Yahveh

speaks to Jesus' dealings with the blind man. 'I myself will search for my sheep and look after them ... I will rescue them from all the places where they are scattered on a day of clouds and darkness' ([34:1-12ff](#)).

IMPLICATIONS FOR EVANGELIZATION WHAT DOES THIS PASSAGE HAVE TO SAY TO US TODAY?

1. *Evangelism in Jesus' way begins with a recognition of our weakness* **P. 261** and *vulnerability*. Power or authority proceeds not from position and intellectual knowledge, but from self-sacrificing service (cp. [Mk. 10:42-45](#)). The privileged subjects and objects of evangelization are the weak, the poor, the little people. Privileged are also those who leave behind the prerogatives of status and draw nigh unto their underprivileged neighbours. They choose, like their Lord, to serve from a position of weakness and of marginality. In the profound words of D. T. Niles, they recognise themselves as 'beggars who show other beggars where together they can find bread.' St. Paul remarked that 'God chose the foolish things of this world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong, He chose the lowly things of the world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him' ([1 Cor. 1:27-29](#)).

2. *Spiritual blindness often has ideological roots*. Intellectual pride, the defence of religious and social status, privileges, nationalism, racism and sexism blind our eyes so that we are unable to discern the situation and need of the people who surround us. This attitude distorts the true meaning of evangelization. The Church *must* recover the true sense of evangelism in the way of Jesus Christ if it is to save its own soul.

3. *Evangelization and the pastoral ministry are inseparable*. Seeing, judging and acting require discernment, critical criteria, and consistent action when we have to choose between several alternatives of pastoral action. If we follow along Jesus' way, our ministry will develop a critical dimension and take on a prophetic quality, as we confront false social, political, and religious options, particularly those that we find in our own Evangelical tradition.

In the words of Orlando Costas (to whom this article is dedicated), 'The final proof of any theological proposition is not its academic precision but its transforming power ... Even as the Apostle reminded the church at Corinth so many years ago, "The kingdom of God is not a matter of talk, but of power" ([1 Cor. 4:20](#)).² These words are a masterly summary of the content of [John 9](#). Are we not yet very far from living up to its implications?

Guillermo Cook is the Associate General Secretary of the Latin American Theological Fraternity (FTL) and the General co-ordinator of CLADE III: the Third Latin American Congress on Evangelisation (Quito, Aug. 24–Sept. 4, 1992). This article was originally written in Spanish for an FTL book in honour of Orlando Costas, after his death. **p. 262**

² Orlando E. Costas, *Boletín Teológico*, No. 28. Latin American Theological Fraternity.