

The Gospel of Liberation

By David Chandler

One of the dangers of living at Webb is centering our lives up here on the hill and forgetting that the rest of the world out there exists. Contrary to the comfortable feelings you may have, we are living in very unsettled, very polarized times. Several recent events spell this out in a striking way. Look at a few examples:

Bishop Tutu, as you all know, or should know, is a leading figure in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. For his role in seeking to bring about justice and peace in that nation he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Another prominent religious leader, Jerry Falwell, got his picture on the cover of Time Magazine a few weeks ago when he denounced Bishop Tutu as a phony and suggested he was a pawn of the communists.

Five members of an organization of Mothers of the Disappeared in El Salvador were awarded the Kennedy Foundation peace prize last year. Their organization is a courageous grassroots response to the obscenity of torture, assassinations, and disappearances, that have become commonplace in that country. Only one of the five could come to this country to accept the prize. The others were denied visas by the Reagan Administration because their organization was considered "too political". That rationale did not prevent the granting of a visa to Roberto D'Aubusson, widely reputed to be a prime organizer of the death squads in El Salvador.

Some of you saw a film recently about Marianella Garcia Villas, one of the founders of the human rights commission in El Salvador. The commission documented human rights abuses in that country and took them before the United Nations. Marianella and her family were subjected to constant death threats. In the end she was killed by government troops while investigating charges that the government there was using napalm and white phosphorous, supplied by the U.S. government, against civilians in rural El Salvador. When her death was announced on the radio she was labeled a terrorist.

We are living in a time when human rights advocates are labeled terrorists, and when real terrorist organizations mine harbors, burn crops, blow up schools, and health clinics, and kidnap and torture civilians, only to be called "freedom fighters" by the most popular president we have had in a long time.

Where is the moral leadership in the world today? Are we coming apart at the seams? One of the remarkable things about today's revolutions in the Third World is the active role played in them by the church. Many of the leaders of the liberation movements in the third world have arisen from the ranks of the clergy. Desmond Tutu is an Anglican Bishop in South Africa. Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador was an outspoken critic of government human rights violations there until he was assassinated at the altar by a death squad. Ernesto Cardinal and Miguel D'Escoto are two prominent Catholic priests among the leadership of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. D'Escoto recently took a leave of absence from his position as foreign minister to go on a fast. In announcing the fast he wrote that he had "decided to accept Christ's call to begin a fast...as a prophetic prayer to put an end to the policy of state terrorism of the government of the United

States against Nicaragua." He ended the fast 27 days later when doctors warned he was in danger of a fatal heart condition.

You can't understand the revolutions of today unless you understand something of the Christian Theology of Liberation. I would like to take the remaining time this morning to give you a glimpse of the Bible through the eyes of Third World Christians.

The basic premise of Liberation Theology is that God takes part in the concrete struggles of history, that He is in today's struggles as He was in the past, and that God is not neutral: He takes the side of the poor, the oppressed, the outcast, and the slave, against the rich, the powerful, and the oppressor.

The focus of the entire Old Testament is the event that has become known as the Exodus. God, through Moses, led a group of Hebrew slaves out of bondage in Egypt, and out of them He formed the nation of Israel. It was through this experience of being liberated from slavery that the ancient Israelites gained their identity as a chosen people. There are constant reminders of this liberation event throughout the Bible. For example, the opening of the Ten Commandments reads,

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other Gods before me. (Ex. 20:2)

You see, the premise for the Ten Commandments, the core of Israel's law, was their very real, historical liberation by God from bondage in Egypt.

The meaning of liberation is spiritual. A liberated person is a whole person, a person with self respect, who can think and act fearlessly and confidently. The opposite of liberty is the slave mentality, a feeling of worthlessness, shame, and powerlessness. It is ironic that when a person is oppressed he learns to agree with the oppressor about his own worthlessness. Before a slave is even capable of revolt he must shake off the slave mentality. Even though liberation has a spiritual meaning, it is rooted, even in the Bible, in actual concrete, historical, political liberation. The God of the Exodus is not a distant god. He is a God who acts in history, taking up the cause of the poor, the oppressed, the slaves, and the outcasts.

Once the nation of Israel was well established, class divisions arose. The rich and powerful, then as now, oppressed the poor and the outcast. The constant refrain of the prophets is "seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow." The prophet Amos says,

Woe to those who are at ease in Zion and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria... (Amos 6:1)

Woe to those who lie upon beds of ivory and stretch themselves upon their couches, and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall;... but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! (Amos 6:4,6)

Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. (Amos 5:23-4)

The prophets took their message right to the heart of the social, political, and economic arenas where the will of God is enacted or ignored in the concrete terms of everyday life. Daring to bring the Word of God out of the temple and into public life as often as not cost them their lives.

The New Testament opens with the same social message. The Christ, who was expected to come as a king, was instead born to a peasant girl in a barn. Throughout his life he identified with those lost to society: the poor, the outcasts, and those cast aside as "sinners" by the religious elite of his day. In the synagogue at Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry Jesus defines his mission by adopting a passage from the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed,.... (Luke 4:18)

Jesus speaks frequently about money, the poor, and enslavement to riches. In the prayer that has become known as the Lord's Prayer he says, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Many churches say "trespasses" instead of "debts" here, thinking Jesus couldn't be quite so crass. But the word really means debts. How much easier it is to forgive vague offenses than to actually forgive a real debt of real money! This same, crass, Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God" (Mark 10:25), and "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." (Luke 6:20)

It is sometimes said, half jokingly among liberation theologians, that God seeks to liberate the poor from their oppression and to liberate the rich from their riches. Actually they are not joking. Wealth enslaves people. It is the drive to accumulate wealth that leads people to enslave and oppress each other. Wealth is liberating only when it is shared freely.

The spiritual message of the Gospel has many social and political implications. Paul says, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." How many thousands of years has it taken to abolish slavery? And only now is the liberation of women even gaining a foothold. Jesus, in his prayer includes the words, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." If these words are to be fulfilled, the implication is nothing less than the restructuring of society. Can you hear these words through the ears of a Black South African?

It was interesting to me to hear the way the term "Revolution" was consistently used while I was in Nicaragua last year. In this country when we hear the word "revolution" we tend to focus on the fighting and the bloodshed. We would say Nicaragua had their revolution back in 1979 when they overthrew the Somoza dictatorship. But in Nicaragua the term revolution refers to the ongoing process of social change--the building of a new society. This is actually closer to the true meaning

of the word, which is to turn things around. Understanding the term revolution in this way, it is clear why they refer to Jesus as an example of a true revolutionary.

But what about the violence and bloodshed? How can liberation theology support or even condone armed conflict? Proponents of Liberation theology are split on this one. Some, following the model of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, advocate nonviolent methods to bring about social and political change. The majority, however, see the situation as so polarized that they accept armed struggle as the inevitable price for the needed structural changes in society to be brought about. There is a good deal of hypocrisy in the North American objection to revolutionary violence. How many of those who object to the violence of other people's revolutions are willing to say no to our own nation's militarism? Pacifists are, and always have been, a distinct minority. I myself am a pacifist, but I would have a much easier time justifying a violent overthrow of a repressive government that engages in torture and assassination, than I would joining the war machine of a powerful nation to go out and defend the interests of Standard Oil.

I put this question of violence to a Belgian priest I met on the way to Nicaragua who had himself been involved in the early days of the liberation movement in El Salvador and had been imprisoned then deported as a result. His comment was that the violence of the guerrillas is grossly exaggerated compared to the violence of the system already in place. A system which enables a few powerful families to monopolize the wealth of the country while the bulk of the population lives near starvation, a system that outlaws and violently crushes unions to ensure cheap labor and high profits, a system with high infant mortality because it fails to provide basic health care for the poor, a system that stays in power by suppressing the most fundamental human rights of the majority and labels any attempt to better the lot of the poor as Communist subversion, is a system whose continued existence means far more violence than the armed rebellion that would overthrow it.

I have not resolved the violence question for myself. If I were a Salvadoran or Guatemalan peasant I might conclude much more easily that armed rebellion is justifiable. But for this country to sit back and decry terrorism while propping up corrupt governments with hundreds of millions of dollars worth of military aid which is used against the civilian populations of those countries is gross hypocrisy.

I am a Christian. My involvement in social issues of today stems directly from my Christian faith. To those of you who have a faith based on the Bible, I urge you to read it. And when you read it, read it with open eyes. Read it with an awareness of what is going on in history around you. That is the landscape in which God works.