

FROM JOHN CALVIN TO ALLAN BOESAK

JanTerm '87

F. Ross Kinsler

*True and substantial wisdom principally consists of two parts, the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves. But, while these two branches of knowledge are so intimately connected, which of them precedes and produces the other, is not easy to discover.*

--John Calvin

*When will persons in the United States, where so many Christians read and try to understand the Gospel, learn that there is no such thing as safety and security and peace where there is not wholeness of life? And when will they learn that if human life is broken in South Africa or Indonesia or El Salvador, there is no way that life can be whole in the United States?*

--Allan Boesak

Presbyterian and Reformed Christians place considerable importance in the *connectional* nature of their churches, by which they usually mean that local congregations and ministers are held mutually accountable through representative governing bodies under the primary authority of the Bible and one or more secondary authorities, their doctrinal statements or confessions. In recent decades this understanding has expanded as Presbyterians and Reformed persons and churches have played major roles in the ecumenical movement locally, nationally, and internationally. These *connections* are, at least potentially, more profound, more challenging, and more far-reaching than the organizations themselves could have imagined. As founder John Calvin states in the opening statement of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves are intimately connected. As current President of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches Allan Boesak states in his book, *Black and Reformed*, there can be no peace or security in the United States as long as human life is broken in Africa, Asia, or Latin America.

During the month of January 1987 the Southern California Extension Center of San Francisco Theological Seminary and the Synod of Southern California and Hawaii of the Presbyterian Church (USA) held a series of theological courses, seminars, workshops, and conferences to explore the foundations of the Reformed-Presbyterian tradition in relation to critical issues of our time under the overarching theme, "Divine Sovereignty, Human Rights, and Ministry." This theme itself sets the foundational doctrine of Reformed theology, which is at least theoretically uncontested among Presbyterians, in juxtaposition with human rights, which should be a logical corollary but leads into very complex and often controversial realities. As if to head off attempts to derail the whole experiment or limit it to the more liberal end of the theological spectrum, a sub-title for the month's activities was added: "The Reformed Tradition and the U.S. Constitution." January 1987 was, after all, the beginning of the Bi-Centennial of the Constitution of the United States (written in 1787 and ratified in 1789), and Presbyterians take considerable pride in the fact that Presbyterian John

Witherspoon was the only clergyperson to sign both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution plus the fact that the Constitution itself is a remarkable parallel to the Presbyterian form of government.

Thus the stage was set to challenge the whole church, i.e. Presbyterians in Southern California (plus a few from other traditions and regions), to examine their religious heritage from Calvin to Boesak, and to renew their commitment to local, national, and global struggles for personal dignity, social justice, and human fulfillment according to God's sovereign will.

#### THE SPIRITUAL ROOTS OF JUSTICE AND PEACE

Perhaps the most critical connection to be made throughout JanTerm '87 was this connection between spirituality and the struggles for human liberation, between the inner journey and the outward journey, between prayer and politics. At the opening retreat on this subject Professor Howard Rice offered an extensive survey of "Presbyterian Spirituality," in which he noted that the founders of this tradition all insisted on wedding spirituality with involvement in the world; he then proceeded to enumerate the conflicts among U.S. Presbyterians down through history around this very issue. The continuing tendency to polarize and divide the church between pietists and activists should itself be a clear indication that faith and action, love of God and neighbor must never be separated.

In another presentation during the retreat Ross Kinsler explored "The Spiritual Journey for Justice and Peace" by examining the example and teachings of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels. Jesus' message was clearly that God is sovereign over all of life, that salvation is for all of life, and that his disciples are called to give their lives in service to others. Discipleship or spirituality, which means the leading of God's Spirit, therefore consists of entering into the struggles of our time for justice and peace and human fulfillment in all its dimensions.

#### MINISTRY IN A MULTI-CULTURAL CONTEXT

Under the biblical teaching that all people are created in God's image and under the constitutional principal that all are created equal, U.S. Christians are doubly challenged to support those who are still being marginalized because of race, ethnic background, or sex in this country. During the first week of January Synod's Advocacy Committee on Women in the Church led a series of seminars on "Justice for Women: Challenge to the Church." Some of the participants shared their anger at the church's continuing insensitivity toward women; others expressed dismay at the absence of support for or even openness to the issue of women's distinctive perspectives and perceptions; the seminar itself was an attempt to do feminist theology through reflection on these experiences.

During the second week of January Synod's Asian Presbyterian Council presented a carefully planned series of seminars on "Asian American Realities

and Ministries." Noting that there is no such thing as an Asian cultural reality, panelists spoke of their Japanese-, Chinese-, Korean-, Taiwanese-, and Southeast Asian-American experiences, which included struggles with personal identity, cultural differences, generation gaps, and White racism in church and society. During the third week of January Synod's Black Advisory Committee led a series of seminars on what it means to be "Black and Reformed." Dr. Allan Boesak began the series with an exposition of the Dutch Reformed Church's role in providing theological ideology for apartheid in South Africa and of his own struggle as a black minister of that church to unmask apartheid as not only a moral aberration but a sin and a heresy. On subsequent evenings Professor Harold Hunt and Drs. Spencer Gibbs and Charles Marks pressed for a critical analysis of imposed and internalized racism in U.S. churches. During the last week of January Justo Gonzalez led a series of seminars on "Hispanic Realities and Ministries."

Each of these series was meaningful and powerful for the participants. Each exposed the unfulfilled promises of a tradition and a church that strongly declare the sovereignty of God over all of life but all too uncertainly pursue the creation of a truly multi-cultural church. One of the primary goals of JanTerm '87 was to bring together these critical agendas by placing them in close proximity. The seriousness of the problem was evidenced by the almost total lack of men at the seminars on justice for women, the very small attendance of Anglos at the other three series, and the very limited crossover from one group to another. Southern California is, after all, an unique testing ground for pluralism, for the region will soon have no majority population and 27% of the Synod's congregations are already predominately non-Anglo.

#### CROSSROADS IN THE STRUGGLE FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE

The other major test of U.S. Christians' commitment to divine sovereignty and human rights is their solidarity with peoples around the world who suffer under oppressive and violent regimes, especially those that are supported by the U.S. government and U.S. economic interests. JanTerm '87 included Saturday conferences on human rights in the Middle East, South Africa, and Central America, three regions specifically recommended for attention by Presbyterian peacemakers. In each case participants were challenged to consider the current crisis from faith perspectives. In each case they were confronted with the tragic implications of current official policies and the urgency of change. For in each region lives are being sacrificed daily to maintain an intolerable, unjust social order, making peace more remote and massive bloodshed more likely.

Synod's Middle East Task Force invited Presbyterian theologian Edward Huenemann, whose son-in-law is General Secretary of the Middle East Council of Churches, to give an overview of conflict in the Middle East, which he likened to a black hole capable of drawing in and extinguishing the whole world. A panel composed of a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim demonstrated that dialogue is still a viable alternative to disaster. Speaking at the Conference on South Africa were Huenemann, Drs. Nico and Ellen Smith, and the African National Congress' U.N. Representative Neo Mnumzana. The Presbytery of the Pacific co-sponsored this event and arranged its regular business in such a way that delegates could participate in some of the sessions. The Conference on Central

America featured Drs. Justo and Catherine Gonzalez, who presented historical and theological perspectives for an understanding of the current crisis. Workshops opened up numerous avenues of service, solidarity, and advocacy on behalf of the suffering peoples of Central America and refugees in Southern California.

The purpose of these conferences was not only to inform and challenge the participants but also to motivate and equip them to lead their congregations into study, prayer, and action for justice and peace in those regions. The purpose was not simply to focus on these regions but to open up windows of understanding that would shed light on global problems that are closely parallel to the local injustices dealt with in the seminar series mentioned above. At some points it became dramatically evident that there are overt and covert connections between them all. Perhaps the most obvious is the relationship between institutionalized racism in South Africa and resurgent racism in the U.S. Perhaps most pervasive is the interconnected militarism of Israel, South Africa, Central America, and the U.S., which contributes enormously to poverty in this country and around the world. The economic realities underlying these relationships have yet to be dealt with seriously in local churches.

#### THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

A series of week-long courses provided the most substantive theological input during JanTerm '87. Old Testament Professor Marvin Chaney led the first week's course in biblical studies on "The Jubilee Challenge." Using Leviticus 25 as a point of entry into the whole Bible, he explained the absolute necessity of understanding the political economy of rural agrarian societies in order to comprehend the jubilee mandates. Inversely to apply the jubilee mandates today the modern community of faith must engage in socio-economic analysis of its own context. The dynamics of oppression and exploitation, then and now, are equally challenged by the call of the jubilee: "Proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants." Chaney reminded us that this quotation from Leviticus 25:10 is inscribed on the Liberty Bell.

The second week-long course was in Reformed theology: "The Sovereignty of God and Human Rights." Professor Huenemann recommended a rereading of Calvin with a focus on power, the public good, and the poor. Sounding strangely like the renewed Catholic Church in Latin America and reminiscent of Matthew 25, Calvin taught that the cry of the poor is the voice of Christ, that the test of any society is in doing justice with the poor, that the marks of Christian community include economic sharing, and that God's sovereign power is manifested through giving life for others. Huenemann used this quotation from Allan Boesak: "Calvin is dangerous in the hands of the oppressor. It is most useful in the hands of the oppressed."

Justo and Catherine Gonzalez taught conjointly the final course, which was on contextual theology, "Theologies in a New Key." Being church historians, they brought fundamental insight into new contemporary theological initiatives by turning back to the early church. Prior to Constantine the theological stream represented by Irenaeus was historical and contextual, like Third World,

Black, and feminist theologies today. As an Hispanic and a woman, they demonstrated the importance of reading the Bible and doing theology in the context of human struggles rather than as abstract exercises in allegedly universal theology. The God we serve in Christ is after all active in history on the side of the poor against oppression.

#### CONCLUSION

How does one evaluate an experiment such as this? To what degree and to what extent were all these connections realized? Will the church continue to be challenged and renewed and led by God's Spirit through those who participated? Will the various Synod networks that co-sponsored these events continue to deepen their spiritual roots and broaden their outreach into and beyond the church on behalf of justice and peace? What better way is there for theological education to challenge the whole church to be faithful in today's world?

In addition to the activities mentioned above Dr. Boesak preached a moving sermon on Sunday morning at Pasadena Presbyterian Church and another that afternoon at an ecumenical service in Los Angeles. On Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, January 19, he gave the keynote address at the Los Angeles City Banquet, making another important connection with King, of whom he considers himself a disciple. Altogether more than 4000 people's lives were touched by these activities. The final note is best expressed in Boesak's words:

*Therein lies my hope: that the church of Jesus Christ will yet discover the gospel of liberation and hope for human fulfillment and wholeness. The challenge to the church is to discover and implement that gospel: to become whole itself, and to work for the wholeness of life everywhere in the world.*