

"THE GOSPEL AND THE POOR"
Lessons from Central America
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A July 1984 travel seminar group of 11 lay and clergy leaders from Southern California visited Mexico, Nicaragua and Guatemala in order to learn firsthand about the crisis in Central America. We were in Nicaragua during the celebration of the Fifth Anniversary of the popular Sandinista Revolution, and we talked with many people about the former Somoza dictatorship, the liberation struggle, the achievements of the five years since the triumph over Somoza, the growing threats from the U.S., and the role of Christians in all of this.

Just up the road from the hotel where we stayed in Managua, there is a large billboard which reveals the deep conflict that has emerged within the Catholic Church in Nicaragua and which captures what some feel is the central challenge of the Gospel in our time. The sign, evidently placed there by the hierarchy or its supporters, reads: "Para nosotros no hay más que un solo Dios" -- "For us there is but one God." These enormous letters were obviously meant to serve notice on the Sandinista government that the church would continue to claim the higher allegiance of the people and not succumb to the ideology or the absolutization of the revolution. But someone had subsequently added to that sign, in similar letters, probably with a can of spray paint, an additional line: "El Dios de los Pobres" -- "The God of the poor." These words turn the challenge around and send it right back to the church hierarchy. Yes, we know there is but one God, the God of Jesus Christ and the Bible, but this God is on the side of the poor. That is what the Nicaraguan revolution is all about. Where then is the church?

When Jesus initiated his ministry in Galilee, he proclaimed God's coming to rule among the people as sovereign over all of life,

not just in their hearts or in their places of worship, in their religious life or life after death. He explained that God's rule belongs to the poor (Luke 6:20), which includes the poor in spirit (Matthew 5:3), i.e. those who are one with the poor. And when he read the Old Testament scriptures at Nazareth, he identified himself with these words from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." Having lived and worked among the poor of Central America, I would like to share with you some reflections on the meaning of the Gospel among the poor there in the hope that you might be inspired by the same Spirit to lead your church to side with the poor here.

THE ENIGMA OF PROTESTANT MISSION IN CENTRAL AMERICA

From 1964 to 1977 we were fraternal workers or missionaries appointed to serve under the Presbyterian Church of Guatemala. We and our Guatemalan colleagues thought we understood very well what is the mission of the church: to preach the Gospel and equip others to do so, to build up the church and extend its outreach, to help those in need through literacy, education, and health care, and to find ways to improve the standard of living through various development projects. The churches were growing quite rapidly, particularly among the major Indian populations. As we looked toward the centennial celebration, we took some pride in the work of our church, which included nine presbyteries, about 500 congregations, 150 pastors, and 77,000 very active members.

When we examined Jesus' definition of his ministry in Luke 4:18-19, however, we were troubled. We had preached the Gospel for 100 years, but the poor were worse off than ever. We had healed the sick, but there was now more malnutrition and unnecessary death than ever. We thought we were bringing release to the captives, but suffering and oppression had reached unprecedented and intolerable levels. One of our colleagues wrote these words:

Hunger is real here in Guatemala, and it's getting worse. 1965 studies indicate that 42% of Guatemalan families had inadequate caloric intake. Ten years later that figure had risen to 70%. Other recent studies indicate that 81% of Guatemalan children less than five years old suffer from malnutrition. That translates into some 900,000 children. Half of all deaths here are of children under five. Interestingly, archaeologists tell us that 500 years ago, before the Spanish conquest, the Mayans ate better than their descendants do today.

Another friend, who worked in an ^{ecumenical} ~~Protestant~~ welfare program, began to publish a journal in which she documented the constant, growing evidence of torture, disappearances, and clandestine burials. After several attempts on her life she left the country, but one of her colleagues, a Jesuit priest, was taken, tortured, brainwashed, and made to "confess" and inform on the others. Nine of Julia's partners in that organization were subsequently murdered by or with the consent of government security forces.

The enigma of Protestant work in Guatemala reached its height in November 1982 during the centennial celebration. Activities throughout the country culminated with a large parade, representing most Protestant groups, and a mass meeting in Guatemala City. The crowd numbered over 500,000, and it was estimated that 20% of the country was now Protestant. The President, General Efraim Rios Montt, was on the platform, for he, too, had been converted and was an active lay preacher. But some of our people had been killed, several pastors were imprisoned or exiled, and massacres were taking place among the peasants. We later learned that at that very time one million people, mostly Mayan Indians, were being uprooted and perhaps as many as 20,000 were killed during the 16-month rule of Rios Montt.

This enigma was also a matter of personal anguish. We began to look for the root causes of repression in Guatemala, and we soon

learned about the role of the U.S. government and economic interests. The critical event took place in 1954. The Guatemalan people had thrown off a dictatorship ten years earlier; they had successfully held two democratic elections; and reforms were being implemented in many areas of public life. Then the executive and Congress began to implement plans for land redistribution, which is the main prerequisite for justice and democracy in that part of the world. Unused lands of the U.S.-based United Fruit Company were expropriated, with indemnization, and that led to a coup organized, funded, and directed by the U.S. government. Military rule was reinstated, and the landed oligarchy were able to continue utilizing the wealth of the nation for their personal prosperity at the expense of their own people. You can imagine the personal pain we felt when we realized that the two most powerful figures in the 1954 coup were John Foster Dulles, U.S. Secretary of State, and Alan Dulles, Director of the CIA, sons of a Presbyterian minister, members of our own church.

THE REBIRTH OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN CENTRAL AMERICA

The Second Vatican Council was followed, in 1968, by the Medellin Conference of Latin American Bishops. To the surprise of everyone, including the bishops themselves, that meeting produced a document that called upon the church in Latin America, after 450 years of identification with the ruling people, to side with the poor. The key phrase was, "God's preferential option for the poor." Considerable numbers of priests and religious, including a new generation of missionaries from North America, began not just to serve the poor but to live with them, to see the world through their eyes, and also to discover what the Gospel might mean in their situation.

Catechists and other lay leaders, with or without the presence and approval of the clergy, began to meet in small groups to talk about their faith and their needs. They began to read the Bible,

most of them for the first time, and it spoke to them in clear and surprising ways. They soon realized that they were God's children and that they were being oppressed unjustly and cruelly against God's will. They began to support each other, to ask for change, and even to organize popular movements. Armed only with the Gospel and the voice of the people, they were accused of subversion, abused physically, and their leaders, including ~~some~~ ^{over 500} priests and ~~many~~ catechists, were killed. But they had gained a sense of dignity and a sense of hope that could not be repressed, even when the rate of killing reached 1000 per month. 14

Priests and theologians who were involved in this struggle began to talk about liberation theology. It had always been understood that salvation or redemption means liberation, but now it was evident that any authentic articulation of the Christian faith must proclaim liberation in socio-economic as well as psycho-spiritual terms. For too long the churches in Latin America -- Protestant as well as Catholic -- had taught a kind of religion that reinforced the submission of the poor to the forces that oppressed and exploited them. It also became evident that theology had been shaped by the world view and perceptions of dominant peoples and must itself be liberated. Emerging among the poor and those who sided with them was a new consciousness of their humanity, a new experience of the church, and a new vision of society.

A NEW REFORMATION?

Between 1981 and 1983 the United Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church, US appointed task forces to study the crisis in Central America because of conflicting reports being presented to the American public. Their report to the General Assembly of 1983 affirms unequivocally that the U.S. government has been supporting the forces of oppression and death and that fundamental change, like that achieved by Nicaragua, is necessary in order to bring justice and peace to the region. But the report goes on to suggest that a new reformation is taking place among the Christians of

Central America, and this reformation is providing a base not only for a renewed church but also for a new society in which rights of poor and marginalized people are central.

Richard Shaull, who was Professor of Ecumenics at Princeton for 18 years, spent half of 1984 in Nicaragua, living among the poor, observing the Christian base communities and the process of social change, and writing a book entitled *Heralds of a New Reformation: The Poor of South and North America*. He observes that 16th Century Europe cried out for a new appropriation of the Gospel, which Martin Luther and others found in the biblical phrase, ~~justification~~ ^{we just shall live} by faith." Today justification by faith is preached all over North and South America, even by those who exploit and oppress the poor. It may well be that the key to unlock the power of the Gospel in our time is the biblical call to justice, particularly as expressed in God's preferential option for the poor.

Biblical scholars, following the lead of the base communities and liberation theologians of Latin America, have joined in the "rereading" of the Bible, and they have discovered that this theme, the concern for the poor, is not secondary or minor but central. And that final phrase of Luke 4:17, "to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord," is a call to the jubilee vision of a just society in which debts are remitted, slaves are freed, and the land is re-distributed.

When we visited with Christians in Nicaragua, we were moved by their stories -- the depth of their faith, the genuineness of their communities, the strength of their hope in the face of enormous obstacles. In contrast our own faith seems shallow, our churches without community, and our hope for change almost non-existent. We sense that we are being called to break with the power structures and life-styles and religious forms that imprison us in order to side with the poor in our own society and with those who suffer violence at the hand of our nation.

One of the new expressions in Nicaragua is "Entre Christianismo y revolución no hay contradicción" -- "There is no contradiction between Christianity and revolution." We asked Tomás Borge, the only remaining Commandante from the original Sandinista Front, now Minister of Interior, how he sees the relationship between religion and revolution. He began by pointing out that the church has usually opposed revolution, e.g. the French Revolution and the Mexican Revolution. Then he said, with the observation that he does not belong to any church, that 90% of the Sandinistas are Christians, that their intention has been to walk hand in hand with the church, and that their revolution has tried to put Christ in the midst of the people.

If you ever go to Nicaragua, be sure to attend the Peasant Mass at the parish of Barrio Rigüero in Managua on Sunday afternoon. The inside walls of the modern circular building are covered with mural paintings depicting the struggles of the people against their oppressors from the 16th Century Conquest until today. A lively youth combo leads the singing with guitars and drums and Nicaraguan tempos. The liturgy, which is sung by the entire congregation, begins with these words of introit:

*You are the God of the poor
 the human and simple God
 the God who sweats in the streets
 the God with the well tanned face
 that's why I am ~~speaking~~^{talking with} to you
 just like all my people do
 because you are the ~~laborer~~^{worker} God
 the Christ who labors with us.*