

Prayer and Praxis

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The past six months of my ministry were consumed by a seemingly endless series of projects. My exhaustion created in me a dread of events that I had eagerly anticipated for weeks. Having endured the ordeal, by God's mercy, I feel a need to reflect on my experience and to consider how I turned my calling into a compulsion.

My desire for reflection, however, goes beyond simply reconsidering my present workstyle from a personal standpoint. In a broader sense, I want to evaluate campus ministry in light of contemporary theology. My purpose is to identify insights that address both my own situation (undoubtedly not unique) and the shape of ministry in higher education. I will begin with my readings and work through their implications toward a concluding reappraisal of our vocation.

Any sampling of Christian thought today is inevitably idiosyncratic to some degree. The diversity of viewpoints competing for attention defies any attempt to generalize about the leading opinions. Ours is not a time for theological giants, such as Barth, Niebuhr, and Tillich, who dominate the thinking of a generation. I am personally grateful, having tired long ago of hearing such scholars' opinions recited as the last word. More important than great systematic theologies today are creative efforts to understand the Word of God in particular contexts of ministry. Of course, significant doctrinal controversies persist, but in my opinion, practical theology prevails and for good reasons.

Evangelical theologians seem most concerned about correct doctrine, the preservation of orthodoxy. It is only fair to add that this concern has clear practical implications. Evangelical denominations have been plagued by doctrinal controversies and power struggles which threaten the efficacy of their missions program.

In his book, After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology, Bernard Ramm seeks a theological methodology which comes to terms with the Enlightenment without either resorting to obscurantism or abandoning the essentials of historic Christian orthodoxy. Ramm's model is Karl Barth, because, "Barth's theology is a restatement of Reformed theology written in the aftermath of the Enlightenment but not capitulating to it."¹ The value of Ramm's book is its refreshingly positive approach to the basic questions confronting every evangelical theologian, such as Biblical authority. However, whether Ramm's constructive efforts to get beyond the impasse at the Enlightenment will inspire others to reconsider their intransigence is questionable.

Donald Bloesch tries to rally evangelicals around the Gospel itself, beyond the exaggeration of peripheral issues. In his book, The Future of Evangelical Christianity: A Call to Unity Amid Diversity, he writes:

My position is that the crucial issue today is the battle for the gospel. It is not simply the authority of the Bible but the integrity of the gospel that is at stake. This includes the ethical imperatives of the gospel as well as the doctrinal distinctives integral to the gospel.

We need to reaffirm what Paul Tillich calls "the Protestant principle," the protest against absolutizing the relative. Both church and culture today are guilty of creating idols, of absolutizing ideas and values that supposedly serve the cause of human advancement.²

Bloesch gives a balanced account of the various opinions present among evangelical Christians, the potential pitfalls attendant to their various controversies, and suggestions for the recovery of unity. The sane, insightful analysis offered by Bloesch is badly needed.

My principal reservation about evangelical theology is its preoccupation with the preservation of orthodoxy, as if it were a museum piece or an endangered species. This self-appointed and self-congratulatory role as defender of the faith is as unbecoming to evangelicals as the obsession with being philosophically

and socially fashionable is to liberals.

My preference for a position apart from that stereotypical, yet too often real, dichotomy, is at least in part sustained by Harvey Cox in his recent Book, Religion in the Secular City: Toward a Postmodern Theology. Though Cox would normally be one of the best possible examples of faddish liberal theologians, he writes that "with the passing of the modern age, the epoch of 'modern theology' which tried to interpret Christianity in the face of secularization is also over. A fundamentally new approach is needed."³ Cox identifies the forces shaping this "coming theology" as "vigorous antimodern religious movements" such as the religious right in the United States and the Christian base communities in Latin America. As Cox reads its critics, "modern theology has failed because by accepting the intellectual and political rulers of the modern world as its interlocutors, and by agreeing to the contract that turned the economic and technical spheres over to allegedly autonomous inner dynamics, it forfeited its ability to say anything to the margin. But it is from the margins that the postmodern world is coming to birth."⁴

As for the contribution from Jerry Falwell and his religious right colleagues and followers, Cox expects that "a postmodern theology will agree with the fundamentalists that ultimately people will not be satisfied with the separation of will and intellect, thought and feeling, affect and cognition which has informed the modern liberal understanding."⁵ Of course, apart from fundamentalism, the increasing interest in spirituality over the last decade illustrates this point. Cox later discusses a "worldly spirituality" or "engaged mysticism" which he anticipates as the personal life style of this postmodern Christianity.⁶ I will return to its essential, underemphasized role.

The methodology and content of a postmodern theology Cox draws primarily from Third World liberation theology. Finally, he contends that "these indispensable components of the coming theology can be

assembled only if we appreciate and use the accomplishments of modern theology, including 'liberal' theology, rather than rescind them." He suggests that we can "learn from the courageous way it tackled the modern world how we might now begin to tackle its postmodern successor."⁷

At this point, Harvey Cox is self-serving. To make an appreciation for liberal theology a requirement for the success of postmodern theology needlessly and unjustifiably undercuts the possibility of this new approach being heard by conservative Christians. My criticism is supported by the following comments of Henri Nouwen on the liberation theology of Gustavo Gutierrez:

As one who has been exposed to many styles of theological liberalism, I am struck by the orthodoxy of this Christ-centered spirituality. It is solidly rooted in the teachings of the ecumenical councils. The Christians of Latin America, as Gustavo himself once pointed out to me, came to a realization of the social dimensions of their faith without going through a modernistic phase. He used Archbishop Romero as a striking example. Through his contact with the suffering people, that traditional churchman became a social critic without ever rejecting, or even criticizing, his traditional past. In fact, Archbishop Romero's traditional understanding of God's presence in history was the basis and source of his courageous protest against the exploitation and oppression of the people of El Salvador. A similar quality is characteristic of Gustavo's spirituality which is fed by the age-old Trinitarian faith of the church and by the religious experiences of the great saints who incorporated that faith in their lives.⁸

Liberation theology emerges out of the Gospel story itself. The key methodological concept is praxis; that is, as Frederick Herzog put it, "God-talk comes in God-walk."⁹ Theology is defined as "critical reflection on praxis,"¹⁰ beginning with that of Jesus. In his book, Justice Church: The New Function of the Church in North American Christianity, Herzog elaborates:

The Gospel story is the nucleus and basic framework of every Christian theology — on the level of praxis. It reflects Christopraxis.

What happened in Jesus was that a hermeneutic of Christology was turned into a hermeneutic of Christopraxis. We need to explain to the church that in this praxis God entered history, so that thought finally could rise from praxis and we too could act our way into thinking.

So what is praxis hermeneutic? It is taking the metaphorical language of the New Testament as praxis-event that introduces Christopraxis into humankind.¹¹

The Christopraxis in the Gospel is the source of liberation. Rosemary Radford Reuther explains:

Liberation theology focuses first on the historical Jesus, specifically on his liberating praxis. It is the deeds of Jesus that reveal the meaning of his person and his message.

Fundamental to Jesus' liberating action is his preferential option for the poor...The liberation of the poor becomes the critical locus of God's action in history.¹²

Making the point even more strongly, James Cone contends that "any theological perspective that does not remain committed to the liberation of the victims cannot be Christian."¹³ The basic New Testament text for liberation theology is Luke 4:16-21 in which Jesus announces his ministry at Nazareth by reading from 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,
to proclaim the acceptable year of
the Lord." (RSV)

Feminist theology, black liberation theology, Latin American and other Third World liberation theologies share this biblical theme.

Reduced to its essence, liberation theology is about following Jesus. Gutierrez simply states: "A Christian is defined as a follower of Jesus, and reflection on the experience of following constitutes the central theme of any solid theology." The purpose of liberation theology, according to Gutierrez, is "to develop a reflection that is concerned with and based on practice in the light of faith."¹⁴

My assessment of liberation theology is that its basis is biblically sound and should challenge all Christians, conservative and liberal alike, seriously to examine their lives. As Jim Wallis has observed, the common need of liberals and evangelicals is conversion.¹⁵

Christopraxis, or following Jesus, is clearly our calling in the New Testament. In all three Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 16:24, Mk. 8:34, Lk. 9:23), Jesus says to his disciples: "If anyone wants to come with me, he must forget himself, carry his cross, and follow me" (TEV). Jesus' concern for the poor and the oppressed is evident not only in the announcement of his ministry at Nazareth, cited above, but in many other texts such as the Lukan account of the Beatitudes, Luke 6:20-21; 24-25 (TEV):

Jesus looked at his disciples and said,

"Happy are you poor;

the Kingdom of God is yours!

"Happy are you who are hungry now;

you will be filled!

"Happy are you who weep now;

you will laugh!

"But how terrible for you who are rich now;

you have had your easy life!

"How terrible for you are full now;

you will go hungry!

"How terrible for you who laugh now;

you will mourn and weep!"

Of course, the implications of Jesus' concern are

highly disputed. I do not agree with those who have used liberation theology as a rationale for violent revolution. It is the selective, self-serving citation of Christopraxis that has produced such distortions.

The praxis hermeneutic is an excellent method by which theology can facilitate the recovery of integrity in the church. Orthodoxy, especially as defended and discussed in abstract, has not produced orthopraxis. Paulo Freire, one of the first to discuss the concept of praxis for liberation in his book, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, addresses this problem in defining authentic and unauthentic words. The authentic word implies praxis, action and reflection to transform the world. However, the unauthentic word distorts the implied praxis. Freire writes:

An unauthentic word, one which is unable to transform reality, results when dichotomy is imposed upon its constitutive elements. When a word is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the word is changed into idle chatter, into *verbalism*, into an alienated and alienating "blah." It becomes an empty word, one which cannot denounce the world, for denunciation is impossible without a commitment to transform, and there is no transformation without action.

On the other hand, if action is emphasized exclusively, to the detriment of reflection, the word is converted into *activism*. The latter — action for action's sake — negates the true praxis and makes dialogue impossible.¹⁶

Both sides of the distortion of praxis are present in the church. The most obvious is verbalism, which undercuts our witness. As Jim Wallis points out in The Call to Conversion, "the evangelism of the church has no power when the essence of the gospel is not lived out in the world."¹⁷ More subtle, being culturally sanctioned, but no less dangerous, is activism. I need only mention the word "burnout" and recall the past six months of my ministry to express what it means. Through friends of prominent peacemakers and pro-

motors of spirituality such as Jim Wallis and Henri Nouwen, I have learned that they also go through similar cycles of over-extension and exhaustion from unreflective activism.

True praxis obviously requires the support of consistently observed spiritual disciplines, which are as rare as all the talk and books about them are common. Either our activism allows no time for such concerns, or we engage in verbalism, paying only lip service to our disciplines. In titling this paper "Prayer and Praxis", I deliberately put prayer first because I believe that campus ministers understand praxis better than prayer, even though the two are interdependent. We scrupulously avoid empty, pious talk and try to speak authentic words. What I question is whether we have learned to nurture such words with prayer.

My guess is that whatever interest we have in Thomas Merton is based more on his engagement with the world than on his life of prayer at the Abbey of Gethsemani in rural Kentucky. Yet his striking insights into the affairs of the world were only possible as a result of his contemplative vocation. He understood the power of a life of prayer even on his first visit to the monastery in April 1941. He wrote in his journal:

This is the center of America. I had wondered what was holding the country together, what has been keeping the universe from cracking to pieces and falling apart. It is places like this monastery — not only this one: there must be others.

Abraham prayed to the Lord to spare Sodom if there should be found in it ten just men. The Blessed Mother of God, the Queen of Heaven and of the Angels, shows Him daily her sons here, and because of their prayers, the world is spared, from minute to minute, from the terrible doom.¹⁸

The absolute necessity of prayer undergirding praxis could hardly be better stated. Our challenge is to account for its absence.

At least part of our predicament, I believe, comes from being employed by institutions that function on a

business model, in which cost-effective production of graduates, counseling, conversions, alumni contributions, Bible study groups, missions money, well-attended programs, articles published, or otherwise is what justifies your position. This corporate management style is an inappropriate means which is destructive to otherwise worthy ends. Hence we often find ourselves feeling more like managers and promoters than ministers.

One possible, perhaps inevitable, remedy for our compulsive misarrangement of priorities is exhaustion and dissatisfaction such as I experienced. Richard H. Bell, in his recent book, *Sensing the Spirit*, looks at the ways we forget God and then discovers such a paradoxical hope in our situation. He quotes Simone Weil:

It is to the prodigals — to those who exhaust all their strength in pursuing what seems to their good and who, after their strength has failed, go on impotently desiring — that the memory of their Father's house comes back. If the son had lived economically, he would never have thought of returning.¹⁹

This reminder of grace is critical, for our hope does not lie in economical living or in any personal exertion, but in realizing our desperate need to return home.

We pray to survive, to remember home and our daily need for grace to escape cultural captivity. Jesus regularly withdrew from the crowds and prayed to his Father. In Luke 5:16 (TEV), we read: "But he would go away to lonely places, where he prayed." In the Garden of Gethsemane, he wisely counseled his disciples: "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak."

What I have tried to establish is the essential pattern of the Christian life. Dr. Susan Annette Muto, Director of the Institute of Formative Spirituality at Duquesne University, describes it this way: "Characteristic of Christian living in the world is a rhythm or flow from inspiration to incarnation, from prayer to participation, from contemplation to action."²⁰ This pattern of prayer and praxis is simply the way of the saints, which Henri

Nouwen referred to in his previously quoted comments on the spirituality of liberation theology. Sainthood is exactly what we are called to attain and to teach. Henri de Lubac, a Jesuit theologian, wisely observed:

It is not the proper duty of Christianity to form leaders — that is, builders of the temporal, though a legion of Christian leaders is infinitely desirable. Christianity must generate saints — that is, witnesses to the eternal. The efficacy of the saint is not that of the leader. The saint does not have to bring about great temporal achievements; he is one who succeeds in giving us at least a glimpse of eternity despite the thick opacity of time.²¹

That glimpse of eternity comes in Christopraxis, our identification and suffering with the poor and the oppressed. Mother Teresa of Calcutta describes the connection as follows:

The true inner life makes the active life burn forth and consume everything. It makes us find Jesus in the dark holes of the slums, in the most pitiful miseries of the poor, in the God-man naked on the cross, mournful, despised by all, the man of suffering, crushed like a worm by the scourging and the crucifixion.

...Our prayers should be burning words coming forth from the furnace of a heart filled with love.²²

Prayer and praxis focus on daily faithfulness in the little things which compose the largest part of our lives. Endless special projects are not necessary.

The implications of this pattern for campus ministry are fairly obvious. Initially, we ourselves need to develop a life of prayer which goes beyond daily devotions. That is, silence and solitude should become an integral part of each day of ministry. Our offices must be converted to poustinias. The poustinia is a tradition of Eastern spirituality introduced to the West by Catherine Doherty. Its literal meaning in Russian is desert, but its deeper meaning is “a quiet, lonely place that people wish to enter, to find the God who dwells within them.”²³

In our formative reading, we need to rediscover the

power of the spiritual classics, as well as the Bible. The path we seek to follow is well-trodden by many whose priceless testimonies have been recently retranslated and returned to print. Charles de Foucauld, the founder of the Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus, observed that "if souls consecrated to God, monks who meditate on perfection from morning tonight, feel the need, to the end of their lives, of reading and rereading the works of the great masters of the spiritual life and the lives of the saints, their forerunners, how much more have those the need that have to live in the world in the midst of so many distracting preoccupations."²⁴

In addition, we need to discover how to engage our lives, including part of our work time, with the poor, the oppressed, the outcast in our communities. Obviously, each community will provide its own unique opportunities for such Christopraxis. It has occurred to me several times that tithing a part of our work weeks could result in our most significant ministry both to the community and to our students. Critical reflection on this experience, as well as insights gained in solitude, could compose a significant journal.

These disciplines of prayer and praxis which we attempt to observe, by the grace of God, could provide the basic structure of our ministry. Students would be advised on how to adapt this pattern to fit where they find themselves on their pilgrimage. Covenant groups could be formed to encourage accountability and sharing among the students. Regular retreats, in the classic tradition, including some periods of silence, are essential.

What I am suggesting is that we are called more to be spiritual directors than to be directors of religious activities. A spiritual director, in the words of Thomas Merton, is "one who helps another to recognize and to follow the inspirations of grace in his life, in order to arrive at the end to which God is leading him. The whole purpose of spiritual direction is to penetrate beneath the surface of a man's life, to get behind the facade of conventional gestures and attitudes which he presents to the world, and to bring out his inner spiritual freedom, his

inmost truth, which is what we call the likeness of Christ in his soul."²⁵ This approach seems closer to the ministry style of Jesus than the task-oriented administration of religious activities awkwardly coupled with counseling.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Bernard Ramm, *After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology* (New York, 1983), p. 14.
2. Donald G. Bloesch, *The Future of Evangelical Christianity: A Call for Unity Amid Diversity* (Garden City, 1983), p. 81.
3. Harvey Cox, *Religion in the Secular City: Toward a Post-modern Theology* (New York, 1984), p. 21.
4. Cox, p. 96.
5. Cox, p. 58.
6. Cox, p. 210.
7. Cox, p. 21.
8. Henri J. M. Nouwen, "Foreword," Gustavo Gutierrez, *We Drink From Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (Maryknoll, 1984), p. xviii.
9. Frederick Herzog, *Justice Church: The New Function of the Church in North American Christianity* (Maryknoll, 1980), p. 3.
10. Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (Maryknoll, 1973), p. 6.
11. Herzog, pp. 4, 50-51.
12. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Disputed Questions: On Being a Christian*, Journeys in Faith Series (Nashville, 1982), p. 93.
13. James H. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, Journeys in Faith Series (Nashville, 1982), p. 111.
14. Gutierrez, *We Drink From Our Own Wells*, p. 11.
15. This comment comes from quotes I made during a presentation by Jim Wallis entitled, "Making Common Cause With Evangelicals" at the Second Fosdick Convocation on Preaching, The Riverside Church, New York City, October 18, 1982.
16. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York, 1970), pp. 75-76.
17. Jim Wallis, *The Call to Conversion* (San Francisco, 1981), p. 19.
18. Thomas Merton, *The Secular Journal* (New York, 1959), p. 183.
19. Richard H. Bell, *Sensing the Spirit*, Spirituality & the Christian Life Series (Philadelphia, 1984), p. 17.
20. Susan Annette Muto, *Pathways of Spiritual Living* (Garden City, 1984), p. 31.
21. Quoted by Dorothy Day in *By Little and By Little: The Selected Writings of Dorothy Day*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (New York, 1983), p. 102.
22. Mother Teresa of Calcutta, *The Love of Christ: Spiritual Counsels*, ed. George Gorree and Jean Barbier (San Francisco, 1982), pp. 110-111.

23. Catherine de Hueck Doherty, **Poustinia: Christian Spirituality of the East for Western Man** (Notre Dame, 1975), p. 30.
24. Charles de Foucauld, **Meditations of a Hermit**, trans. Charlotte Balfour (New York: Orbis Books, 1981), p. 146, quoted by Muto, pp. 32-33.
25. Thomas Merton, **Spiritual Direction and Meditation**, (Collegeville, Minnesota, 1960), pp. 8-9.