

Incarnation and Liberation:

Theological Themes for Ministry in Higher Education

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The knowledge factory is an intensely theological place. Gods many and lords many claim their followings there, and true believers of many cults, both sacred and secular, offer intensely articulated theologies. As for classical Christianity, "new occasions teach new duties," and Christian thinkers must always be about the business of working out fresh formulations of the Gospel appropriate to this pluralistic marketplace. As a practicing campus minister I find that I must continually redefine my working theology in response to the scene which is presented to me and in response, also, to my own continuing development. Theologizing is not simply an abstract discipline done in exclusively religious categories; it is also made out of the stuff of human history and of personal existence. That is both its blessing and its challenge, for it raises immediately the issue of truth and its validation.

In the twentieth century, theology has been preoccupied with epistemology, whether cast in categories such as revelation versus reason, grace versus nature, or awareness versus empiricism. Though theologians in a more classical mode may complain that such a preoccupation does little justice to other themes in the Gospel, the epistemological question is one we have been dealt by the university. It is a critical one for anyone wishing to speak theologically in a university setting. The scientific method has been so widely accepted as a valid form—indeed *the* valid form—of arriving at knowledge that to speak in terms of "givens," of truths invading human consciousness beyond ordinary means of discovery, is virtually impossible any longer. Nevertheless we can still argue that the question of truth is not only a critical starting point, but even a happy one, for encountering the university!

There is an intellectual crunch, of course, involved in speaking this way, and it comes about because modern men and women can scarcely hear alternatives. Both within and without a Christian frame of reference empiricism has become *the* methodological standard against which all other claims to truth are judged. (Even the not-far-distant rage for the occult and for Eastern mysticism has a strong element of rationalism in it, not to mention sheer pragmatism, as proponents of various viewpoints strive to validate them in terms of their effectiveness). In such a context campus ministry must enter not so much a "No" as a "Yes, but also . . .". A place must be left—and not merely a place, but a priority—for the God who acts and who gives of Himself and His truth in the matrix of life and history, even in the subconscious levels of the human spirit. As a campus minister, in short, I am bound to remind people that they do not find all the truth; often *it* finds *them!*

But just here is that "happy" possibility. Such a stance is not to be one of sharp discontinuity. The truths of revelation do not stand against the results of either rational or empirical researches as a realm that is wholly distinct. Actually, these forms of knowing can be *mutually supportive* options; critical, historical and linguistic studies, for example, can flesh out the interpretation of Scripture, just as a Christocentric theology can offer a place to stand to view the varying anthropologies proposed in the several social sciences. Perhaps not even the church-related university, to say nothing of its secular counterpart, can restore theology to its medieval throne among the sciences, but certainly there is room for Christian theologians within higher education to challenge prevailing ideologies, question methodological idolatries, and insist that there are realms beyond the sensory. To "bring every thought captive to obey Christ" (II Cor. 10:5) may not be altogether realistic in so secular and pluralistic a setting as a public university, but it remains an ideal toward which I as a campus minister can labor and into whose presence I can usher Christian students and faculty.

The implication of such a foundation is that one who would come to terms with the university must use a style which is essentially incarnational. As a Christian living out my identity on campus, it is my task to integrate and incarnate an expression of the spiritual and the emotional as well as the intellectual. I am to bring the Good News to inquiring minds as a point of reference which is more fleshed-out and more encompassing than the stances represented by secular outlooks.

To be incarnational in style implies also to me that my witness to the truth is more than idea confronting idea, word addressing word. Witness becomes a stance for a whole life, not just a formal intellectual posture. Witness at the university is the incarnation of other values in addition to the academic—the enfleshment of spiritual and esthetic dimensions in a world which appears to place a premium on only one dimension.

The careful reader may by now have detected certain assumptions which I have made—assumptions about human nature. I must confess to a somewhat optimistic anthropology; though I do recognize the reality of evil, the power of sin, and the way in which the demonic may grip us, in the last analysis I feel that sheer exposure to truth will overcome human resistance. There is for me something so compelling about a confrontation with an incarnated, self-authenticating, enfleshed reality that I cannot quite avoid placing all my hopes on education. If, somehow, I could only get enough students in my study groups, the problems of the world could be solved!

Obviously I *do* recognize the difficulty with naive assumptions about the correctibility of human nature. I know that there are serious and systemic distortions in human personality and, indeed, in institutions because of basic human predilections toward power and greed. Therefore the education/nurture model on which I have depended so heavily needs a corrective. I am beginning to find this corrective in a Christology seriously grounded in the idea of liberation, in a way of understanding Jesus which has been informed by the insights of Third World and other liberation theologians.

I begin most of my theological thinking, in fact, with a Christological center: a vision of Christ as lord of all life, not just of the realm arbitrarily designated "religion." This Christ commands that we love our God with heart, soul, mind, and strength—with all that we are; and He expresses His care for every phase of human existence, individual and social. He is the redeemer of all the broken and twisted relationships which all of us have forged.

In this setting the liberation motif comes, to me, to mean that Christ is always and everywhere working to free the victims of oppression, even of self-inflicted oppression! He both judges and heals each of us, dealing not only with what we do to others, but also with what we do to ourselves. In this sense what He does, and what I do as his minister, is bound up with the cosmic sweep of human history; if I am able to be the channel through which

someone finds integration, wholeness, and a way of understanding and organizing life, then I am becoming aligned with the ongoing work of the Kingdom of God. I am doing more than contributing to national goals, keeping peace within the university, helping to make a productive citizen, or solving some parent's self-worthy difficulty; I am a co-participant with the Christ who is already at work as a catalyst in human history to liberate human beings for the potential which He has created in them. Such an outlook does justice, to both the pessimistic and the optimistic strains in Christian anthropology, and even goes a long way toward offering a meaningful eschatology. Most important, it means that I do not have to indulge in futile exercises of self-justification or in the win-lose game of being successful only at overtly "religious" activities. I can be content and, indeed, excited about being an agent through whom the Kingdom comes, however imperfectly.

To carry this idea further, I have learned more and more in recent months how much such a Christology means that as a campus minister I will come to care for whole persons with many kinds of needs, not just for "warm bodies" at religious gatherings. I am freed and driven to immerse myself in and take seriously the life of the university as a community and as an institution, not just as a magnet for young people. As has always been true throughout Christian history, the most powerful metaphor for this kind of understanding of the work of the liberating Christ is the Cross. Even as one who knew Himself to be a free agent, capable of making moral decisions, who chose to give Himself over to the bondage of the Cross so that others might experience a deep new freedom, so I as campus minister may also be privileged to operate in self-giving freedom. Free of many of the strictures placed on students, faculty, staff, and administration, with no "political clout," save my own moral authority, I know that I have the option of becoming one of the freest persons on campus. And I have the further option of using that freedom in self-giving ways, of investing myself in the needs of others so that they too can find hope and can discover liberation themselves. The Cross is a figure of the active involvement of God in the terrors of this world, suffering the worst but doing so under a sense of divine compulsion and love. For me the Cross does not serve to legitimate some sort of morbid death wish, but it does remind me that I am to be vastly more than a distant, dispassionate, professional functionary!

At this point a word needs to be said for community and for the work of community-building. The free church tradition of the

church as *laos*, the people of God on pilgrimage and on mission, serves us well. Christians on campus, all Christians, have a missional vocation. They are more than souls rescued from the brink of personal despair; they are those who have been directed back into the world with a ministry of service and love to perform. Their witness is more than religious enthusiasm and persuasion; it is activity as God's counterculture, employing the insight of the Christian faith and the power of the Spirit to share healing. As a community of faith, nurture, and witness, they are crucial to the ongoing progress/process of the Kingdom.

In other words, as campus minister I find that I cannot and must not do it alone; the lone eagle model, however tempting, will not suffice. It is theologically bankrupt as well as strategically hopeless. Whether such a model shows up as liturgical ecclesiasticism, which places great stress on summing up ministry in the person of the clergyman and the performance of his liturgical functions, or whether it turns up as the charismatic ecclesiasticism with which evangelical Christianity is plagued, whereby the success of the religious community is measured by the loyalty of its members to the style and the viewpoints of its leadership, the result is the same—a monolithic and rigid organization which contradicts the openness and the creativity of Christian community. How much more Biblically valid and how much more psychologically sound it is for a campus minister working among the young in the faith to see himself/herself as a resource, doing an equipping ministry and refraining diligently from creating idolatrous dependencies.

The incarnation-liberation themes which I am trying to develop do give support to the idea of an overtly and specifically religious community on the university campus. They also suggest that the marks of such a community will include a generous portion of humility laced with a strong sense of identity, an evangelistic concern and a passion to communicate the truth as we understand it, tempered always with a radical openness to the truth of a God who may address us through any means at all, even the most secular means, and a concern both to build up its own life and to give it away. Christian community on campus is, in short, full of delightful paradoxes!

The thing which attracts me and which continually stimulates me in my theologizing about the work of campus ministry is that there is virtually nothing which I can rule out of my scope of interests. If I am moved to get interested in the quality of student

leadership in the student government, that is a proper arena for ministry. If I sense that the faculty would have its teaching skills enhanced by a means of relating the Christian faith and its understanding of human nature and of the nature of truth to the teaching task, then I am free and am even impelled to tackle that. Or, should I discover, as always does happen, that the least of these His freshmen needs a few good friends, then that too is my calling. Even though I must set priorities and must work within a consciousness and a community whose vision is circumscribed, ultimately there is virtually nothing which I can rule out of bounds for the coming Kingdom. Even so, let it come, Lord Christ!

Response

"When anyone is united to Christ, there is a new world; the old order has gone, and a new order has already begun." II Corinthians 5: 17
NEB

Is it not true for us that, in some sense, the faith communities in which and out of which we minister have a different set of expectations for self and others than are encountered in the daily routine of the rest of academia? There is much to appreciate in Joseph Smith's treatment of incarnation and liberation as themes characterizing a ministry in higher education. I wonder, however, if the time has not come for campus ministers to begin "fleshing out" a life-style that more prophetically challenges the university to take a serious look at alternative ways of experiencing truth. I wonder if those old "principalities and powers" called "realism and success" have not supplanted the informing source of life and strength that has traditionally characterized the people of God through their obedience to a vision. It seems that, to some degree, our faith community has moved beyond the need to establish a Christian intellectual apologetic. Rather, our calling as a Biblical peo-

ple is to become a community shaped by compassion and compelled by a vision of a new creation—a new world. I vigorously resist, therefore, the conclusion that campus ministers "must set priorities and must work within a consciousness and a community whose vision is circumscribed"

Few of us are mourning the passing of theology as the "Queen of Science." Many of us struggle, as did the writer of the Seventy-Third Psalm, with the seeming victory of the arrogant and unprincipled. Many of us are grieving the seeming shift in the life of the university from education to training. Most of us recognize that students can satisfy college requirements without ever having seriously wrestled with the poverty and oppression that surrounds and, in some cases, permeates the campus. It was only when the psalmist "went into the sanctuary of God", that he began to envision how short-lived were the worldly. We, too, must begin to see that our calling is not primarily informed by theological fads, "new formulations", or the need to "redefine" our ministries. Somehow we must begin to wrestle with a vision of a new world that is far greater than

an epistemological question "dealt" to us by the university.

The strength of the article lies in the seriousness with which it takes an incarnational life-style. Becoming the Body of Christ at the university demonstrates that the activity of God in the creation is personal. That life-style compels others to follow and responsibly evokes their own gifts for ministry. Freeing persons to realize their created potentials, however, is penultimate, at best, if the new world for which that potential was intended is not envisioned. Failing to be followers of that prophetic vision, we may very likely be reduced to becoming proponents of the kinds of neo-narcissism whose gospel is variously called self-authentication, self-actualization, etc. Smith is precisely on target, I think, when he points to that Truth that discovers *us*, rather than the other way around.

Thus speaks the Lord who is God,
 he who created the skies and
 stretched them out,
 who fashioned the earth and all
 that grows in it,
 who gave breath to its people,
 the breath of life to all who walk
 upon it;
 I, the Lord, have called you with
 righteous purpose
 and taken you by the hand;
 I have formed you and appointed you
 to be a light to all peoples,
 a beacon for the nations,
 to open eyes that are blind,
 to bring captives out of prison,
 out of the dungeons where they
 lie in darkness.

Isaiah 42: 5-7

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