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LIBERATING NEWS: EVANGELICALS AND LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Baptist theologians are too few in number to allow for the loss, through untimely death, of any one of them, let alone one who has such important things to say as Orlando Costas in his posthumously published *Liberating News: A Theology of Contextual Evangelization*. Planned as one of a trilogy - embracing theory [theology], case studies, and a methodological handbook, only this, the first, was completed. Costas, latterly Dean at Andover-Newton, who did so much to bridge the gulf between the ecumenical and the evangelical, began in hospital to write a preface for this volume, but only managed to write, 'The practice of evangelism has been the passion of my ministerial career.....', and there words merged into mortal pain and weakness. In an introduction to what he believes will become a classic in its field, his former colleague, Gabriel Thackre, pays tribute to Costas as a pioneering exponent of 'holistic evangelism', equally ready to criticise church growth theories and liberation theologies as each in their separate ways but half truths.

Costas' own urgent writings are to be found in five volumes, *The Church and its Mission* [1974], *Theology of the Crossroads in Contemporary Latin America* [1976], *The Integrity of Mission* [1979], *Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom* [1982] and the book here reviewed. These are not essentially books for the study,

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though they are thoroughly scholarly in their presentation, but urgent calls to Christian disciples to engage in radical action, nicely focused in a Nicaraguan hymn, translated by Orlando and his wife, Rose, as a personal testimony:

Sent by the Lord am I.
My hands are ready now
to help construct a just
and peaceful loving world.
The angels cannot change
a world of pain and hurt

into a world of love,
of justice and of peace.
The task is mine to do
Make it reality -
O help me, God, obey,
help me to do your will.

Costas was concerned to distinguish the true from counterfeit evangelism, as he makes clear when he condemns much that goes under the name of evangelism for failing 'to meet the test of the cross': 'the gospel they proclaim has been made such a marketable message - offering a plastic Jesus and an inoffensive call to a terrific happy life that guarantees an unending good time - that it has become unrecognizable', its promoters mere 'carbon copies of the consumer society' from which they come, their churches barely distinguishable from other social clubs or businesses which offer the market a service - here a religious one. He has to admit the possibility of a popular evangelism becoming 'a powerful ideological weapon in the hands of those who are more interested in maintaining their social, economic and cultural privileges than in responding affirmatively to those who are at the bottom of society': 'when people claim to be born of the Spirit and then icily continue to turn their backs on the outcast and disenfranchised then it is time for us to ask whether they have been born of the Spirit of the crucified Christ or born of the spirit of Antichrist.'

Such criticism is the more telling as coming from the lips of one, who himself was such a passionate evangelist. Indeed he sets out his position of 'radical evangelicalism' with considerable clarity: belief in salvation by grace through faith; conversion as a distinct experience of faith; and the demonstration of the new life in piety and moral discipline. He carries his radicalism through in to a thorough discussion of the methodology by which he plans to construct his theology of evangelism, speaking of the elucidation of a 'theological anthropology' that is both concerned with a perception of 'humanity from the divine perspective', and a knowledge of God himself, in so far as he has disclosed his person and purpose in revelation. The sources for such study are threefold: the primary resource must always be scripture but alongside this he sets tradition, defined as 'the accumulated experience of the Holy Spirit', and experience, the making concrete of the divine encounter within the life of an individual or a community at a given moment of time.

In developing his theme, Costas uses the insight of another Baptist missiologist, Raymond Fung from Hong Kong, when he affirms that men and women are not only sinners but also the sinned against, believing that for many an exposition of their 'sinned-againstness' is an important precondition to their receptivity to the message about their sinfulness. But 'sinned-againstness' is seen nowhere more forcefully than in the cross: incarnation thus spells out God's complete identification with the oppressed. Here is 'the human and sensitive God, the God who sweats in the street, the God with a sun scorched face'.

Biblically, Costas works out his theme with extensive reference to Deutero-Isaiah, with its development of the critical image of the herald who proclaims a gospel of peace and salvation and the rule of God; and to the Epic of Esther, the heroine of an ethnic minority in a male-dominated society, who becomes the vehicle for liberating her people from what could easily have been the first-recorded holocaust, thereby acutalizing the vision of Deutero-Isaiah 'for such a time as this'. The evangelistic significance of this book in scripture, which has sometimes worried

Christian commentators for its lack of reference to the name of God, becomes clear.

'In many contemporary situations,' argues Costas, 'we run the risk of confusing a pious vocabulary and a "religious" lifestyle with faith and spiritual commitment. The real crisis of faith in societies with a religious tradition is not secular humanism but rather the lack of radical obedience among those who profess commitment to the living God.' The church had a desperate need to repossess the prophetic dimension of evangelism; how else can the discrepancy between Christian presence in a world which witnesses so much moral bankruptcy and so little of peace and freedom. Practical atheism - the confession of God with the lip but the denial of God by deeds - has too much sovereignty in the world today, thus authentic evangelism has to start with the conversion of the church.

Costas' New Testament analysis starts by tracing the inter-play within the Gospel narrative between national and religious establishment and the more shadowy existence of those who knew themselves to be both sinners and the sinned against. Geographically this is spelt out in the dynamics of the interplay between Galilee and Jerusalem (especially as recorded in Mark), with significantly the last of the resurrection appearances taking the story back to Galilee, 'the circle of the heathens', with its peculiar accent, its cultural crudities and even its suspect theology, and so Nathanael's scepticism. The scandal of a saviour *from* Galilee, as also a saviour *for* Galilee, is well portrayed. Amongst the followers of Jesus, there is clear distinction between those who come from Institutional Israel, and those whose background is more dubious, especially the women, the tax collectors and the foreigners who minister to Jesus when the chosen twelve deny him.

Whilst deeply sympathetic to the varied nature of the human condition especially where it is in greatest distress, Costas sees the theological setting for the evangelistic imperative in the community of the Trinity, the suffering of the cross, and the dynamism of new life breathed by the Spirit. All this represents a proper corrective to the shallow evangelistic pragmatisms that over anxious and impatient disciples all too easily identify with the activity of God's kingdom. Part of the test of authenticity is that in true evangelism the herald of the gospel also becomes the agent of transformation. Whilst the situation in this country requires, as Costas would be the first to admit, the exploration of a different context, he shows quite clearly the radical Biblical principles on which such a strategy needs to be worked out.

SOCIETY NEWS

The Annual General Meeting 1991 will be held in the Purbeck Lounge of the Bournemouth Conference Centre at 4.30 p.m. on Monday, 22 April. Mr John H. Y. Briggs, MA, FSA, FRHistS, of Keele University will give the annual lecture on 'Ecumenical Evangelicalism: the amalgamation of the General and Particular Baptists in 1891'. Two new volumes of *English Baptist Records* will be available: see p.78. *These may be ordered from the Treasurer, Revd T. S. H. Elwyn.*

Book now for the Summer School to be held at Regent's Park College, Oxford, 28-30 June 1991. Lecturers include Dr Grant Gordon and Professor George Rawlyk from Canada, while Dr Morris West will continue his study of M. E. Aubrey, begun in the 1990 lecture. Mrs Susan Mills will speak on 'Sources for the Study of Baptist History' and introduce us to the national Baptist collection in the Angus Library. Full board £60. Conference Secretary: Revd E. S. M. Coleman, 12 Barford Crescent, Kings Norton, Birmingham B38 0BH.

There is still time to enter for the Payne Memorial Prize Essay - see inside back cover for details.