

Jesus Christ, the Life of the City?

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A glance at the contents of *Churchman* for the past two decades reveals that the subjects of urban mission and urban theology have not figured prominently among articles or book reviews. Not that successive editors and editorial boards should alone engage in breast-beating: urban issues have not been accorded major consideration in evangelical literature or conference agendas. David Sheppard's book *Built as a City* attracted considerable attention when published in 1974, though genuine enthusiasm for it came largely from radical quarters while evangelicals remained cautious and non-committal in their comments. At Nottingham in April 1977, the problems facing urban parishes were relegated to a fringe meeting additional to the main National Evangelical Anglican Conference programme. The anger aroused at this among the (relatively few) representatives from such parishes present at the conference led directly to a significant week-end consultation at Nottingham in February 1978. This generated momentum for the launching in April 1981 of the Evangelical Coalition for Urban Missions (ECUM), an umbrella federation of several evangelical organizations already involved in evangelism and social action in urban areas. Coincidentally, the new grouping went public at a conference in Birmingham on the very day that the first riot erupted in Brixton, and these riots resulted, *inter alia*, in the Scarman Report, Mr Heseltine's much-heralded visit to Toxteth, and the creation of a specifically urban project under the auspices of the Church Pastoral Aid Society. More significantly, perhaps, an awareness has been created in the suburban heartlands of evangelicalism that the biblical gospel faces a test of its credibility more searching than at any previous time this century.

It is therefore not surprising that the theme of this summer's World Council of Churches Assembly, 'Jesus Christ, the Life of the World', holds particular interest for those working in urban situations. For the Brixtons and Toxteths illustrate in the starkest manner the 'death in the city' which Francis Schaeffer in the late sixties predicated of western civilization and culture in its entirety. An hour's drive around London's once-thriving East End demonstrates that death reigns on every side: death of industry (heavy and light), death of employment, death of decent housing, death of the environment, death of health and educational facilities, death of hope. There is death, too, of the institutional church: nonconformist chapels now serve as storage

depositories for second-hand furniture or as small-scale factory units, and Anglican shrines begin to follow suit as 'pastoral reorganization' takes effect. Only the black-led churches seem to swim against an ebb-tide of faith more eloquent than Matthew Arnold could depict as he stood on Dover beach. 'I am the way, the truth, and the life', proclaims the text outside the dilapidated mission hall. In what sense can this be true for those who inhabit the decaying terraces and soulless tower blocks, only 1 per cent of whom will have their names on the electoral roll of their parish church?

An urban Christology from the 'underside'

Gustavo Gutiérrez has described the task of the liberation theologian as that of doing theology from the underside of history. In attempting a response to the theme 'Jesus Christ, the Life of the World' from the context of the inner city, we enter upon a task which is tantamount to doing theology from the underside of Britain. Many other evangelicals have struggled longer and with greater wisdom in this context than we have. Yet this inchoate response will, we hope, reveal the grappling in which numbers of our sisters and brothers committed to the task of urban mission are also engaged.

What is our context? An inner-city parish of 4,000, 31 per cent of whom were born outside the United Kingdom, and 63 per cent of whom have no car. Three quarters live in rented private or council accommodation, either in London Victorian terraces or tower blocks. Ours is the only place of Christian worship in the parish, with a small struggling congregation of mixed race and diverse background—in short, an unremarkable urban situation. Yet the truism holds good that 'our situation . . . is the first theological reference point. The other reference points (Bible, tradition, *magisterium*, history of doctrine) are not the first reference point, a "sphere of truth-in-itself", unconnected to the historic "now" of truth-praxis.'¹ We ask the question, 'What is the significance of Jesus Christ, the life of the world?', only from our own context, and the answers given can only be authentic answers in so far as they are authentic in our context.

To speak of Jesus Christ as 'the life of the world' can be construed in three ways. First, we may take up the Johannine polarity of life *over against* death: 'If you had been here, Lord, my brother would not have died . . . Your brother will rise to life . . . I am the resurrection and the life.'² In this discourse, John explores what C. K. Barrett has described as a 'dialectical Christology'.³ Jesus is seen as the one who is the bestower of life beyond the grave, yet whose Messiahship is vindicated by his ability, not to ensure that Lazarus will rise to life on the last day, but to return him to life in his mortal body in the here and now. The dialectic consists in the interaction between the staggering eschatological claims of the Johannine Christ and the seemingly mundane yet

stupendous and mysterious signs (feeding the five thousand, healings, raising of Lazarus) in which he trades. In this context, 'the life of the world', and the offer of life beyond death which evangelicals so often hold out in funeral sermons to numbed and hostile mourners, lacks authenticity, perhaps because it is no longer dialectical. We are unable to raise Lazarus. We can't deliver the goods. Mourners, conscious that 'the life of the world' is alien, other-worldly and inscrutable, chatter and move on.

It is crucial, therefore, that 'Jesus Christ, the Life of the World' be given a concrete context in which to become real. It is not enough to claim that he is the *implicit* life of the world (our second possible interpretation). The Christology of Hebrews, which enunciates the truth of Jesus as creator, sustainer, effulgence of God's glory, and possessor of all things at the end (Heb. 1:1-3) requires the *explicit* content of the incarnation if it is to be anything other than a theological abstraction. We may disown Paley's watch-maker in theory, but expound in practice an aberration from the flesh and blood Christology of the writer to the Hebrews. Perhaps we have substituted a divine Big Ben for the watch?

An authentic interpretation of the WCC theme will therefore take account of the dialectical theology of John and the implicit Christ of Hebrews, but will go on to major on a third aspect: the claim that in Jesus Christ is the total fulfilment of human existence. To this John bears witness (John 10:10; 14:6), but it is a theme to which many of the New Testament writers allude, insisting that the quality of life in Christ enjoyed by the believer in the here and now participates in the quality of the life of the age to come.⁴ What, though, does it mean to affirm the availability and existence of such life in the context of the inner city? A random ten examples will have to suffice.

First, the authentic life will be expressed in disciples who *follow* Jesus Christ, rather than merely imitating him. Here we are true to the synoptic tradition. The Christian is called to be a *mathetes*, one who binds himself to his master, rather than the ethically imitative *mimetes* (used only once in the New Testament of the relationship of the Christian to God or Christ, Eph. 5:1). It is in discipleship that the Christian expresses the life of Christ. Sobrino puts it this way: 'For Jesus, it was impossible to concretize his orthodoxy simply by pondering orthodoxy intellectually. It could only be concretized through a concrete *praxis*. Throughout his life Jesus would be involved in concretizing the meaning of such realities as "God", "hope" and "love".'⁵ For the evangelical whose model of mission is based on the Johannine text 'As the Father sent me, so I send you' (John 20:21), it is impossible to avoid the implication that discipleship cannot become a mere abstraction. 'Discipleship meant following in his [Jesus'] footsteps and proclaiming the kingdom; it was a concrete *praxis*. Over against this Jesus set any sort of abstract orthodoxy that came down to the mere repetition of verbal

formulas [*sic*]; he had nothing but anathemas for that. But he did not oppose praxis to concrete orthodoxy because the latter is merely the expression of the former.⁶ In the urban context, the struggle to express the life of Christ in the community can neither be *mimesis*—a pale, sickly apology for discipleship—nor can it be abstract orthodoxy. Neither makes any sense. Rather, we are looking for ‘the priority of orthopraxis over orthodoxy’,⁷ while insisting that orthopraxis is none other than concrete orthodoxy. The disciple, then, will be the one who is engaged in living the life of Jesus Christ, the life of the kingdom of God, as a follower of that same Jesus.

The authentic life will, secondly, express itself in total commitment to the poor. It has often been objected that the poor as a category no longer exist in the United Kingdom, or that their poverty is only a relative poverty. Townsend’s well-documented study⁸ gives the lie to the former argument, while the latter objection, although serving as a salutary reminder of the claims of the Third World, should not distract us from the poor as a category in whatever society we are called to live. Sugden and Samuel answer the question ‘How are the poor perceived?’, in three ways. They are: those below the subsistence level; those who live in relative poverty; and those who are exploited and oppressed as a class.⁹ In Holloway we live among all three categories. Our need is to recapture that commitment to the poor which was integral to the life of Christ’s people in New Testament times. Here we can be helped by the insights of redaction criticism, for to emphasize commitment to the poor is to acknowledge the preoccupation of Luke, pre-eminent among the gospel writers for his emphasis on this theme. An examination of the material which is to be found only in Luke, or which is common synoptic material radically reworked by Luke, serves to demonstrate this. The Lucan Jesus summarizes his ministry in the Galilee manifesto (Luke 4:16–21), and proclaims the blessedness of the poor (6:20–26). Gutiérrez’s balanced comment on this latter *logion*—‘the elimination of the exploitation and poverty that prevent the poor from being fully human has begun . . . The text in Luke uses the term ‘poor’ in the tradition of poverty being an evil and therefore incompatible with the kingdom of God, which has come in its fullness into history and embraces the totality of human existence’¹⁰—steers a course between spiritualizing and glamourizing the estate of the poor. For Jesus, the poor are to be the particular beneficiaries of the inaugurated kingdom. It is the poor who are compelled into attendance at the Messianic banquet (Luke 14:15–24), while the rich and privileged are recalcitrant and unconvictable (Luke 16:19–31). Rich people are enjoined to use their riches pragmatically (Luke 16:1–13), and the effect of the kingdom when it comes to the rich person is radical and far-reaching (Luke 19:1–9). Jesus, the life of the world, expressed his total commitment to, and solidarity with, the poor in teaching, mission and life-style. We his followers can do no less.

A third feature of this authentic life will issue from such commitment. We will recognize the reality and inevitability of the church being involved in class struggle. Julio de Santa Ana, editor of a helpful exploration entitled *Towards a Church of the Poor*¹¹ speaks of the poor as 'mainly all the people who are defenceless and who suffer injustice because they cannot achieve their valid rights because of laws controlled by those in power and who exercise it according to their own interests ... the poor are subjugated, those who are underneath, humiliated in an unjust way by the powerful.'¹² To bring life amidst oppression, subjugation, and humiliation, is to be realistic about the class divisions which permeate our society. The poor have been hammered by a series of blows: the Nationality Act, Housing Benefit legislation, policies in favour of home ownership which are whittling away housing stock, tax cuts for the better-off, benefit increases less than the rate of inflation, removal of rate support grant from urban areas to shire counties, paring of educational resources, and legal action against cheap public transport. Class divisions may no longer exist on traditional lines, but the 'underclass' in the United Kingdom has nobody to stand up for them. The plight of the estimated two million people in this country who have suffered acute poverty in recent years¹³ will not be ameliorated without class struggle. Power is too well concentrated in the hands of the few.¹⁴ Of course the Christian will not approach class struggle in the same way as the Marxist revolutionary. Gutiérrez puts it this way: 'In the context of class struggle today, to love one's enemies presupposes ... that one has class enemies and that it is necessary to combat them. It is not a question of having no enemies, but rather of not excluding them from our love.'¹⁵

The church in general, and evangelicals in particular, have thus far refused to take seriously the dimension of class struggle in British society and elsewhere. There has been an inately forlorn expectation that class divisions would somehow disappear. Yet the reality of the situation is that we have neglected to allow the grace of God to permeate class relationships. Paul's proleptic announcement, in Galatians 3:28, that in Christ the end of divisions between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, and male and female had been achieved, only paved the way for serious conflict within the early church about the manner in which the Jew/Gentile divisions were actually to be broken down. Slavery was not abolished, even within the Christian community, for some considerable time after Paul wrote Galatians, and it is arguable that the male/female divisions within the church are still in existence! To live in the 'already/not yet' tension of the life of the kingdom of God is to live with the conflict of struggling, under God's grace, to bring about an end to racism, power domination, and sexism within the church of God (which is itself a sign of the kingdom) and within a society which will one day be radically transformed into the new heavens and the new earth for which it groans. To bring an end to class

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domination will involve the rich and privileged giving up their rights to the poor, and that will not occur without struggle. 'Nowhere in scripture are the rights of the rich proclaimed, where God is seen as the Saviour and defender of the rich and their wealth, where the poor are exhorted to serve the needs of the rich and be poor for the sake of the wealthy.'¹⁶ To live the life of Christ, the life of the world, is to live committed to eradicate classism.

To see the necessity of class conflict is also, fourthly, to apprehend the cosmic nature of alienation. Liberation theology has rightly alerted the western church to the economic alienation, classically identified by Marx, which is the inevitable by-product of capitalism. Yet we need to identify both the root cause of alienation, explored by Paul in Romans chapter 1, and its manifestations in society. Andrew Kirk has outlined a helpful distinction between *ontological* alienation, the root cause of human problems, and the expression of alienation in society. Kirk builds his distinction on the two words *asebia* (Rom. 1:18)—'the biblical concept of man's ontological self-alienation... an hypothesis which... cannot be verified "scientifically" but which nevertheless most adequately accounts for the evidence of man's incapacity to liberate himself—and *adikia* (Rom. 1:18), which Kirk sees as the outworking in concrete and specific ways of the ontological alienation of *asebia*.¹⁷ Whether or not the Greek words will bear this semantic distinction, it is clear that the consequences of our alienation from God, and thus from ourselves, will be worked out in different ways. To bring the life of Jesus Christ to the alienation of the urban context will require a struggle to identify the ways in which *adikia* expresses itself in that context. It will require the identification of alienation in unemployment, in work, in environment, and in lack of resources, as well as its expression in the well-documented features of urban life with which the media and the spectators of suburbia are obsessively preoccupied.

Fifthly, and because 'life in all its fullness' means more than just struggling against and overcoming some of the negative powers of the city, it will call for a celebratory style of mission. The urban church has lived with the question 'does it work?' suspended over its mission for many years. Churches which have faithfully proclaimed the evangel see no measurable response. Churches which have in time past found a role in caring in the community have seen that role removed through increased state welfare provision.¹⁸ The story of the church in the inner city is a story of retrenchment and contraction, and often despair that the mission of God seemingly has no place there. We struggle with the question of how to recast the evangelistic 'message', of how the distinct Christocentricity of biblical mission can manifest itself. We are learning to listen to the city, to hear its own evaluation of itself, to read the synoptic accounts of Jesus with urban eyes, and to work towards a mission which celebrates and affirms the good in the city. John Vincent has described urban spirituality as 'glorying':¹⁹

An urban spirituality takes its cue... from the life-style, disposition, activity and commitment of Jesus himself in the gospels. It looks at its secular existence in the light of the secular existence of Jesus... It builds itself up out of the Christological core of reality present wherever this secular existence of Jesus, and these mysteries of Jesus, seem to be present on the streets, in the homes, at the community events, in the conflicts, the disasters, the celebrations, and the politics of the urban scene all around.²⁰

Such an urban spirituality will inform our mission, and colour and affect the way in which we proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and seek to do his mission in evangelism and social action. Often the offer of 'life in all its fullness' has been cast as an offer of Jesus Christ 'giving you something better than you already have'. A celebratory mission will look for the transfiguration of the joyful life that already exists in the inner city into a Christocentric glorying.

Implicit in what has already been said is the importance of the incarnation as the seed-bed from which an urban Christology grows. The recent welcome rediscovery of the incarnation by evangelicals as a motivation for 'social action' has led to a reassessment of the mode of our engagement with social structures. Because the Word became flesh, and identified fully with and in specific human culture, we can no longer engage with the world paternalistically or at arm's length. The *mathetes* must immerse him-or herself completely in the given social context to which he or she is called. The incarnate Word came as a poor and oppressed first-century Jew, homeless and persecuted. Yet this was the way in which the God of the universe chose to express himself in the world. The incarnation stamps our consciousness with understanding that the Divine became as we are, yet without sin, and we seek to live with that consciousness motivating and informing our pattern of discipleship. The incarnation was also that action by which God gave visible demonstration of the invasion of this world by the kingdom of God. That invasion we seek to consolidate as we participate in the activity of the kingdom of God in the here and now. 'The means of commitment to the kingdom in present-day praxis is controlled by Jesus' attitude and action.'²¹ The life of the world has become incarnate in the world, and the world can never be the same again. The incarnate Lord has planted the seed of his kingdom among humankind, and by his death and resurrection has begun the process of destruction of the powers of evil which will be ultimately defeated in his triumphant and final kingdom.

Seventhly, we learn from liberation theology the importance of the 'hermeneutical key' which will unlock Scripture and free us to see the life of the world expressed in its pages. For the urban evangelical, the hermeneutical key which unlocked our understanding of Scripture is the kingdom of God. Why is there a need for this hermeneutical key? The problem is identified by Juan Luis Segundo.²² In our interpretation

of our own reality, we raise questions and suspicions concerning the governing ideology of that reality, and we apply those suspicions to the whole ideological superstructure, including theology. To experience theological reality in a new way calls into question the exegetical presuppositions of current biblical study. We therefore have need of a new way of interpreting the source of our faith in the Scriptures, and we thus arrive at a new hermeneutic.²³ This hermenutical circle helps us to transcend the domination of biblical interpretation by ideology, for to understand Scripture in the light of the kingdom of God is to seek radical reappraisal of received evangelical hermeneutical wisdom. The selection of the kingdom of God as the appropriate hermeneutical key is no arbitrary choice; it is the central message of Jesus whose life we live; it stands as a prophetic sign over and against the established order and proclaims the transformation of relationships and structures; it is a theme which permeates the text of Old and New Testament; and it holds within its very nature that *praxis* which enables it to shake off the shackles of ideology.²⁴

An eighth and concomitant insight is the necessity of liberating evangelical thought-forms from dualism. If Jesus Christ is the life of the world, it is impossible that he should be compartmentalized into a 'spiritual' realm. The need to abolish such unbiblical and Greek thought-forms has been powerfully put by Richard Russell, a Dooyeweerdian thinker.²⁵ He argues: 'Evangelicalism is the historical result of two eras of synthesis; the medieval synthesis with Graeco-Roman culture and the modern synthesis with post-Renaissance humanism. This is the background to its dualistic world-view of its division of life into the sacred . . . and the secular.'²⁶ While Russell's solution—a heavy dose of Dutch philosophy engulfed in a charismatic spirituality—is not one which sits easily in the context of the inner city, his analysis is an important one. A rejection of dualism need not, however, lead us into monism. If the hermeneutical key to our understanding of the Bible is the kingdom, then that kingdom can also provide the very continuity between the 'this-worldly' and 'other-worldly' which is the tension point of dualistic thinking. To engage in the activity of a kingdom which participates in history, but which will one day be beyond history in incorruptible perfection—a kingdom which is part of the coming world—is to transcend the awkwardness of dualism. 'The Kingdom is not merely adumbrated, reflected, foreshadowed, or analogically hinted at in the individual and collective realizations of love in history, but actually present, operative, authentically—however imperfectly and partially—realized.'²⁷ In the same way that many of the biblical 'symbols' of the perfected world to come participate in the present-day reality of human existence—human bodies which will be transformed into spiritual bodies, the city of the new Jerusalem, the Messianic banquet—so the kingdom of God stands as a witness to the continuity and the paradoxical discontinuity between history and the world to

come. The liberating feature of this appreciation of existence is that God is seen to be active in history, and the praxis of history moves towards the goal of the kingdom of God without the need for us to predicate millennial assumptions about the betterment/worsening of society. The goal of history is the kingdom of God, and it is not the 'outside' intervention of an external divinity, but the initiative of the divine Spirit of God, who is already at work in the world, which will usher in the consummation and the kingship of Christ in all its fullness. The elimination of dualism brings fresh hope for the urban context, where 'this-worldliness' finds it hard to countenance a 'spiritual dimension' which is in no way related to the here and now. The life of the world must be experienced in the world, and not in a specially constructed spiritual attic.

Jesus Christ also spent much of his earthly ministry drawing attention to the power of evil at work in the world. The Life of the World is the crucified and resurrected one who has overcome the power of the spiritual rulers and authorities.²⁸ To proclaim the life of the world in the face of the forces of death and darkness is to be engaged in a cosmic battle. The urban Christian community needs a demonology which understands the reality of the forces of evil acting against the kingdom, and, whether those forces are encountered in personal, corporate, or structural ways, to proclaim and claim the victory of Christ over the powers. Where the Christian community has debated over the nature of the powers, it needs rather to admit their reality *in the mode in which they are experienced*. For the city dweller, the powers will more often be encountered in oppression, alienation, unjust political structures, and structural inertia than in demon-possession. The reality of the cosmic forces should not, however, be in doubt. This ninth example is a crucial one, in that it is one easily neglected in a naively optimistic view of the struggle in which we are engaged.

Tenthly, to be committed to Jesus Christ, the life of the world, is to be committed to the process of conscientization. Arias²⁹ has characterized Gutiérrez's 'itinerary of a new Christian generation' as a four stage progression: 1) unawareness and political indifference; 2) reformist awareness of social problems (e.g. poverty, marginality, injustice); 3) a process of radicalization, involving a deeper structural analysis of violence and oppression within the system; 4) 'the discovery of the world of the other', when we begin to struggle for the poor and the neighbour, in whom Christ meets us. Paulo Freire coined the word 'conscientization' (making aware) as a description of the grass-roots awakening to the facts of oppression in society. There is a need for this growth of praxis-analysis to take place in the urban Christian community. It has to be praxis-analysis. Hugo Assman has recast Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach in the following way: 'It is not the simple interpretation, but the transformation, of the world, which occupies the central place of the theologian's concern.'³⁰

For the urban church, we are conscientized in order to become part of the transforming work of the kingdom of God, the very life of Christ in the world. That conscientization is a process, and Christians will find themselves at different stages within that process, at different points on Gutiérrez's itinerary. It may seem a strange process for evangelicals to be engaged in, but as Arias points out, in noting the existence of 'radical evangelicals' in the Latin American context, we are unwilling to 'let the gospel be co-opted by conservative political forces, or the adjective "evangelical" be monopolized by conservative cultural Christianity.'³¹

The urban view of Jesus Christ, the life of the world, will differ, depending upon the specific urban context in which it is set. None the less, the ten facets of the Jesus whose life we live, outlined above, will resonate authentically in many other similar situations.

Some considerations for further discussion

By way of summary we pose some issues which require continued study and prayerful debate. They may well surface at Vancouver this summer, and it would be sad if evangelical reactions were to consist in simply restating the old truths assuredly believed among us. There are two crucial 'macro' areas of concern—culture and poverty.

It is still true that the instinctive response of many evangelicals to hearing the word 'culture' is to reach for their guns. But an understanding of culture is an inescapable requirement for anyone engaged in the task of presenting Jesus Christ as the life of the world, whether the activity in question is that of direct evangelism or some facet of political or social involvement. With reference to evangelical approaches to work in the inner cities or urban localities generally, we must confess that we have been guilty of the same attitudes castigated by those who shared in the 1978 Willowbank Consultation on *Gospel and Culture*: "Too often we have ignored people's fears and frustrations, their pains and preoccupations, and their hunger, poverty, deprivation or oppression, in fact their "felt needs", and have been slow to rejoice or to weep with them."³² While we can be thankful that many of the wooden stereotypes of urban life formerly held by Christians of other backgrounds have now been banished, there is still much work to be done in creating a recognition of what may be involved for such people in accepting urban expressions of church and community life as authentic responses to the gospel.

Secondly, we need to understand poverty and formulate appropriate theological and practical approaches to its pervasive effects in the context of our inner-city study. The debate is likely to be sharpened by the appearance of the latest book by the Bishop of Liverpool.³³ Many Christians (including often those who work devotedly in urban situations) are suspicious of, or overtly hostile to, the premise that

there is a divine bias to the poor. They would prefer at least to say that God had a bias towards justice. And they are quick to remark that not infrequently the so-called 'poor' manual worker earns more than the vicar or other full-time Christian worker. Such a reaction indicates a superficial understanding of poverty, which is more deep-seated than just lack of actual cash or the result of fecklessly mismanaging the wage-packet. The sheer depressing poverty of environment of most urban areas only becomes apparent when experienced first-hand over an appreciable time-span.

Evangelical spokesmen like John Stott have rightly taken issue with WCC stances that seem to equate the goal of Christian mission with the eradication of material poverty in the world. Greedy, violent and corrupt poor people in the Third World or inner city are likely to remain greedy, violent and corrupt (in more sophisticated ways) without the removal of their spiritual poverty through the life-changing power of the gospel. But the reaffirmation of such a basic evangelical conviction must not deflect us from wrestling with the issue of poverty in this-worldly dimensions. Lest it be thought that it is only the radical theologians from WCC stables who emphasize this task, we invite the evangelical constituency to meditate upon the words of someone of impeccable biblical orthodoxy, Dr Harvey Conn, professor of missions and apologetics at Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia:

The Old Testament legislation structured by God for Israel's life in the cities of the promised land becomes antitypes (Heb. 9:24) of the heavenly calling that is for all the saints, our archetype in the heavens, that which is to come through the Messiah. Their Hebrew cultural form is dismantled by the explosion of the gospel into all the world's cultures, but their significance as a divine mission establishing justice and righteousness remains the calling of every Christian in the cities of the world.³⁴

Against this background of the call for justice, asserts Conn, the Old Testament legislation regarding the poor was drawn:

The poor remain the apple of God's eye (Ex. 22:22-24). Office in the theocracy was to reflect the justice of God and his prejudice toward the poor. . . . Urban injustice, against this background, becomes apostasy; the rejection of the poor, the rejection of God.³⁵

Fortunately, evangelical thinking about the poor in the inner cities has not been confined to reactive criticism of WCC pronouncements. At the Conference On World Evangelisation (COWE) at Pattiya in July 1980 there was a specific section devoted to the consideration of reaching inner-city peoples. The report is shortly to be published and should be required reading for all concerned with ministry in urban situations.³⁶ We quote verbatim some of the conclusions of the participants at the conference: exigencies of space preclude discussion of

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their relevance for Anglican parochial activity, but they could well form the substance of an extended agenda at PCC, clergy chapter or synodical meetings.

Within ourselves we discover an unwillingness to accept fully the pattern of the incarnation, a refusal to enter into the heart of the world, a preoccupation with our own careers and concerns. Even when we set out to serve or work with the urban poor, we find that our institutions and organizations actually shield us from the painful realities of poverty and divide us from those who are poor.

Where a concern is shown for the total life of people, it is not matched with a commitment of identification with the urban poor to share in their life and struggle.

The church fails to contextualize its leadership, its structures, its forms of worship, its ministry among the urban poor.

Evangelistic and other programmes tend to give the impression of working for, rather than with, the urban poor. Such a paternalistic attitude is quickly identified, resented and rejected.

The Bible is not yet translated into the languages of the urban poor. Nor have we developed the culturally relevant means of discipling the poor where they are illiterate or non-literate.

The message we proclaim often lacks kingdom content and contains only negative moral overtones, which focus on smoking, drinking, etc., as the main expressions of sin from which the poor must repent.

The strong image of the church is that it is aligned with the rich and powerful. This militates against any credible efforts of evangelism amongst the urban poor.

New Christians and new churches among the urban poor lose effectiveness once they begin to take on middle-class characteristics—either through input from outside or through their own imperative towards upward social mobility.

Imported evangelistic efforts from another culture exude success, respectability, cosiness with business and government, and fit only the aspirations and needs of the middle class. They damage work among the poor.

Indigenous churches cannot cope with the books, accounts, agendas and minutes that are the very stuff of middle-class evangelicalism.

The poor as oppressed people have internalized their oppression and believe themselves to be what they are treated to be. Deference is often shown to middle-class incomers and to their leadership.

There has been little love and understanding by Christians for the urban poor. Wrong attitudes of paternalism and inadequate assumptions about the reasons for urban poverty are made among us.

In Europe, the professional clergy of the urban middle class are separated by life-style, training and housing from the local poor. They represent the powerful of the land, and their message is rejected.

Evangelists have not become one with the poor. Until they do, there will be cultural loneliness and longing, and the fear of being considered a failure and of joining the trapped poor. More subtly, there is the doubt that anyone could want his wife and children to live in deprivation.

Theological thinking has not been done among us from the 'underside', from the place of the poor. The communicator has to see things from the correct perspective of the receiver.

Which is where we came in. Our overarching objective is to move on from discussion to action, from doctrine to praxis. Here in Holloway there is a chronic lack of open space in which to walk and talk, so we sometimes resort to the facilities of neighbouring Highgate. It is salutary to stroll to the principal attraction of Highgate Cemetery and reflect on the wording on the grave of Karl Marx: 'The philosophers have sought to interpret the world; the important thing, however, is to change it.' We are all too easily aware that whilst theologians, radical or evangelical, may be discussing what it means for Jesus Christ to be the life of the world, the Trotskyite and other ideological communes in our borough are hard at work changing it.

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NOTES

- 1 H. Assman, *Opresion-liberacion*, quoted in J. Andrew Kirk, *Liberation Theology* (Marshall Morgan and Scott, London 1979), pp.36-7.
- 2 John 11:21-26.
- 3 C. K. Barrett, 'The Dialectical Theology of St John' in *New Testament Essays* (SPCK, London 1972), pp.49-69.
- 4 cf., e.g., Matt. 4:4; John 16:20-24; Rom. 8:18ff.; Col. 3:3-4; 1 John 3:14.
- 5 Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (SCM Press, London 1978), p.390.
- 6 *ibid.*, loc.cit.
- 7 Kirk, *op.cit.*, p.35.
- 8 Peter Townsend, *Poverty in the United Kingdom* (Penguin, Harmondsworth 1979). See also Michael Paget-Wilkes, *Poverty, Revolution and the Church* (Paternoster Press, Exeter 1981).
- 9 Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, *Evangelism and the Poor* (Partnership in World Mission Asia, Bangalore 1982), p.3f.
- 10 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (SCM Press, London 1974), pp.291-9.
- 11 Julio de Santa Ana, *Towards a Church of the Poor* (WCC, Geneva 1979).
- 12 *ibid.*, p.65.
- 13 J. C. Kincaid, *Poverty and Equality in Britain* (Penguin, Harmondsworth 1975).
- 14 See the tabulated evidence in Butterworth and Weir, *Sociology of Modern Britain* (Penguin, Harmondsworth 1972), pp.310, 390, 400. Paget-Wilkes, *op.cit.*, ch.1, also quotes the evidence of the Royal Commission on the Distribution of Income and Wealth.
- 15 Gutiérrez, *op.cit.*, p.276.
- 16 Jim Wallis, *Agenda for Biblical People* (Harper and Row, New York 1976), p.89.
- 17 See the discussion in Kirk, *op.cit.*, pp.171-3.
- 18 The process is well documented in David Sheppard, *Built as a City* (Hodder & Stoughton, London 1974), ch.2.

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- 19 John J. Vincent, *Starting All Over Again: Hints of Jesus in the City* (WCC, Geneva 1981), p.62.
- 20 *ibid.*, pp.61–2.
- 21 Kirk, *op.cit.*, p.199.
- 22 Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Orbis Books, New York 1976).
- 23 *ibid.*, p.14.
- 24 For an exposition of the kingdom of God as a hermeneutical key, see Kirk, *op.cit.*, p.185ff.
- 25 Richard A. Russell, 'The Growing Crisis of the Evangelical World-View and Its Resolutions' (MA thesis, Bristol University 1973).
- 26 *ibid.*, synopsis.
- 27 Jose Míguez Bonino, *Revolutionary Theology Comes of Age* (SPCK, London 1975), p.142.
- 28 See Col. 2:15, etc. There has been considerable discussion of the nature and meaning of 'the powers' in the New Testament. H. Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers* (Herald Press, New York 1977) argues for the powers as ideas and institutions which have become absolutized. Michael Green, *I Believe in Satan's Downfall* (Hodder & Stoughton, London 1981) argues for a more traditional demonology.
- 29 Esther and Mortimer Arias, *The Cry of My People* (Friendship Press, New York 1980), p.128.
- 30 Quoted in Kirk, *op.cit.*, p.41.
- 31 Arias, *op.cit.*, p.107.
- 32 *The Willowbank Report: Gospel and Culture*, Lausanne Occasional Papers No.2.
- 33 David Sheppard, *Bias to the Poor* (Hodder & Stoughton, London 1983).
- 34 R. S. Greenway, ed., *Discipling the City* (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids 1979), p.249.
- 35 *ibid.*, pp.251–2.
- 36 'Reaching Inner-City Dwellers', from a draft prepared for the forthcoming Lausanne Occasional Paper, *Christian Witness to the Urban Poor* (Lausanne Committee for World Evangelisation 1983).