

LIBERATION AND PROSPERITY THEOLOGIES

GEOFFREY GROGAN, GLASGOW

Introduction

The title of this paper may seem strange. On the face of it, Liberation Theology and Prosperity Theology may seem to have little in common, even to be diametrically opposed to each other. A little thought, however, will enable us to see that the very fact of their stark contrast makes them suitable subjects for joint treatment. It is only where two entities have something in common that we may helpfully contrast them. If I were to be asked to contrast the Forth Bridge and three o'clock I would find the task difficult, if not impossible, for they have so little in common. Experience shows that often opposites have a meeting point. In practice, Fascist and Marxist totalitarianism may be equally unpleasant to live under. The effects of cold and heat on the body have some similarities.

Because both subjects are large, and each type of theology has a number of varieties and off-shoots, I propose to limit the scope of the paper. We will concentrate on the central objective features of each of the two theologies. For example, we will say more about Prosperity Theology's concept of God's purpose than its understanding of faith. We will consider first the nature of each type of theology, and then seek their theological and philosophical connections.

We will then endeavour to provide a biblical critique, first of all looking at elements the two have in common and then treating each separately. Finally we will indicate our conclusions on the basis of this study.

Nature of Liberation Theology

Fundamentally, Liberation Theology is a Latin American phenomenon. It originated there and the socio-political background of that vast area is the context for its development. It is true that its basic principles have been more widely applied, *e.g.* in the Black Theology of South Africa and the USA. Certain elements of it have also been appropriated by those who promote Feminist theology. It is clear in fact that there are features of it which have application to any group which might consider itself to be socially, economically or politically oppressed or exploited or otherwise disadvantaged. However, we will concentrate largely on the original Latin American phenomenon.

LIBERATION AND PROSPERITY THEOLOGIES

Gustavo Gutierrez, who coined the term, describes Liberation Theology as 'a theological reflection based on the gospel and the experiences of men and women committed to the process of liberation in the oppressed and exploited land of Latin America. It is a theological reflection... born of shared efforts to abolish the current unjust situation and to build a different society, freer and more human.'¹

Liberation, deliverance, salvation or redemption (the last is the richest of these words) is obviously a concept of great importance in the Bible. Studies of the *kerygma*, whether of the New Testament or of the Old, always have to give it a major place. In discussions of the central theme of the Bible, many biblical theologians have identified it as the most central motif of all. This is the contention of the *Heilsgeschichte* (salvation-history) school. Those too who think of theology as recital see that recital as very largely the declaration of the mighty acts of divine redemption in successive periods of the life of God's people, and finally in Christ.

Liberation, abstractly considered, can be a somewhat vague term. It needs definition in at least four ways. We have to ask who is the liberator, who the liberated, the nature of the bondage which constitutes the need for liberation, and the way in which that liberation is achieved. Traditionally, Christian theology has answered that the Triune God is the Liberator, that the people of God are the liberated and that the bondage is to personal sin, and also to Satan, to the world, to the violated law of God and to divine punishment, because these form a nexus or web of related realities. Liberation is effected objectively by divine justification which is grounded in Christ's atoning work and subjectively by the application of that work to the individual by the Holy Spirit.

It is freely admitted, of course, that this understanding of liberation applies to the New Testament but hardly, in terms of the nature of the bondage and the means of release, to the Old. There liberation is largely although not exclusively from something external,² whether physical danger or social, military or political oppression. Moreover, the liberation, when it comes, is effected either through direct acts of God's power or through the operation, under his sovereignty, of political forces.

Liberation Theology appropriates the Old Testament concept of liberation (which it also finds in some New Testament passages³)

¹ *A Theology of Liberation* (New York, 1973), p.209.

² Exceptions are to be found in Pss. 51:14; 130:8.

³ Chiefly in several passages in Luke 1-4, where, it is interesting to discover, it always occurs in poetry.

SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

and declares it to be of immense relevance today. Wherever there are oppressed people, God is concerned for their liberation and Christians must be also. They should cooperate with historical forces of social, political and perhaps military liberation. The gospel of spiritual liberation is not necessarily jettisoned but finds its place within a wider liberation theme. In social and political liberation, the cross of Christ functions as a powerful indicator that God is on the side of the oppressed, for Jesus himself was oppressed and died as an oppressed person, but God reversed society's judgement on him by raising Jesus the crucified from the dead.

Another important feature of Liberation Theology is the assertion that the purpose of theology is action. Theology is not a purely intellectual pursuit, like so many philosophies. If it is in any measure an attempt to understand, this is always and, in fact, exclusively, for the purpose of action, and the action in view is social, political and perhaps also military.

An important corollary is that only Christians prepared to give active support to movements on behalf of the oppressed have a right to engage in theology. Theology is for the committed, and commitment is not simply to Christ but to the poor and oppressed for Christ's sake.⁴

Nature of Prosperity Theology

Fundamentally, Prosperity Theology is a North American phenomenon. It originated there and the socio-political background of North America, and especially of the USA, is the context for its development. It has, of course, spread to other parts of the Western world. In the nature of the case, it has had little impact in the Third World, although it might have been thought that its message, if true, would have a special sphere of application in poorer countries.

Despite profound differences, Prosperity Theology has some similarities of outlook with a number of other movements, such as British Israelism, certain types of South African Dutch Reformed theology and also with Reconstructionism. All of these, of course, focus attention on the state, and they tend to link state prosperity with an observance of the Mosaic law by modern nation states. Limitations of space forbid our pursuing such similarities in this paper.

Termining Prosperity Theology a 'theology of success', A. B. da Silva has said, 'Generally speaking, [it] can be described as a degeneration and extreme radicalization of the charismatic

⁴ These themes find important place in Gutierrez (*op. cit.*) and the other main Liberation theologians.

LIBERATION AND PROSPERITY THEOLOGIES

movement.⁵ It asserts that prosperity is God's will for every Christian. This may of course be conceived primarily in spiritual terms, for God provides all the spiritual resources we need. The distinctive feature of Prosperity Theology, however, lies in the claim that material prosperity and, usually, also perfect health are God's will for every Christian in this life, and that there are divine principles which, if followed, will guarantee this comprehensive prosperity or well-being.⁶

There is no doubt at all that prosperity is an important biblical theme. It is not as all-pervasive as liberation, especially in the New Testament, but its importance should not be under-estimated. There are a number of examples of prosperous godly people in the Old Testament, including not only Abraham but also Job, both before and after his experience of profound suffering. More significant, however, is the fact that a whole nation, Israel, was promised prosperity in a good land on condition of obedience to God.⁷

In fact, in Israel's experience, liberation and prosperity were the two sides of the same coin, for the God who brought them out – from Egyptian bondage – also brought them in – to a land flowing with milk and honey. From Deuteronomy onwards the twin themes of liberation and prosperity go hand in hand through the Old Testament.⁸

Ideological Links of Liberation Theology

It is important that theological systems should not be viewed in isolation. A theology is never a isolated phenomenon. It emerges and is shaped in an historical context. The theologian may react positively to ideas in the world he inhabits, as, in part at least, many of the Alexandrian theologians did to features of Platonic thought, or negatively, as Tertullian did, but he can hardly avoid producing a theology which bears in some ways the marks of the thought-world he inhabits.

This is true even of the theology of the Bible. We may reject, and rightly so in my judgement, the idea that the early chapters of

⁵ 'The "Theology of Success" Movement: a Comment', in *Themelios* 12 (1986), p.91.

⁶ See e.g. K. Copeland, *The Laws of Prosperity* (Fort Worth, TX, 1974) and Oral Roberts, *The Miracle of Seed-Faith* (Tulsa, OK, 1970).

⁷ Particularly in Deuteronomy, most notably in chapters 26-31, where it is the dominant theme.

⁸ E.g. in Josh. 23:4, 5; 24:5-13; Judg. 6:7-10; 1 Sam. 12:6-8; Ps. 105, etc.

SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

Genesis are the product of Near Eastern mythology or that the Old Testament doctrine of Satan owes its origin to Zoroastrianism. Yet the divine revelation was given in a particular religious context. It seems likely that early Genesis was deliberately anti-mythological and that the place of Ahriman, the Zoroastrian Satan, in the thinking of the Persian overlords of the Jews, made it necessary for fuller truth about Satan to be revealed at that time. In both cases the form of the revelation, but not its content, bore the marks of its religious environment.

– *Theological*

Liberation Theology belongs to the general movement in theology which owes much to Jürgen Moltmann. Moltmann, in his epoch-making work, *The Theology of Hope*,⁹ engaged in vigorous criticism of previous theologies. Traditional theology, both Protestant and Catholic, Moltmann considered to be too much rooted in the past. It spoke much of the deeds of God, but these were always to be found well before our time. Its theology was an interpretation of historical events, and this tended to make it backward-looking.

Rudolf Bultmann encouraged theology to move in a different direction. His historical scepticism and his demythologizing combined to undermine both the history and its theological interpretation in traditional theology. His existentialism, gained from Martin Heidegger, caused him to focus on the present, on the one moment we have, the moment in which we live, with all its challenge. So he substituted a theology of the present for one of the past.

Moltmann regarded both approaches as inadequate. Traditional theology had its eschatology, but this had become as much a purely intellectual construction as had its other concepts. Bultmann used the language of eschatology, but in fact believed in no real future hope. For him, eschatological became a virtual synonym for existential.

Moltmann sought to construct a true Theology of Hope, an approach to the future which was not merely conceptual, but was a programme for action. The function of theology was not simply to interpret but to change, not just to understand but to call to action. The action in view was largely social and political. The kingdom of God is to be created on earth by the action of the Christian church, which should ally itself to the hopes of a more just society cherished and nourished by the working classes.

⁹ *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (New York, 1967).

LIBERATION AND PROSPERITY THEOLOGIES

Knowledge of the history of theology will show that this is not a totally new idea. Reinhold Niebuhr in the USA, before he swung to the right politically, had called the church in Detroit to ally itself with the aspirations of the workers. Rauschenbusch and the social gospel movement were very influential, especially in the more liberal wing of Protestantism. Earlier still was the social emphasis of the Anabaptists. There are even some parallels perhaps with the zealotism of the New Testament period and the national liberation movement led by the Maccabean family.

– *Philosophical*

A great deal has been written about the relationship of Liberation Theology to Marxism. This has been most strongly asserted by its opponents and almost as strongly denied by some of its advocates. Two of the leading Liberationists, Miguez and Segundo (especially the former), have written extensively on the matter, and they take a partly positive and partly negative view of Marxism.¹⁰ What are the facts?

There can be no doubt that Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* was influenced by Marxism and that Moltmann's work itself gave great stimulus to the development of the Liberation Theologies, although Andrew Kirk and others have pointed out that the modern antecedents of this type of theology are at least a decade earlier than the first edition of Moltmann's book in 1965.¹¹

In the late 1950s Christian theologians, both Catholic and Protestant, had begun to enter into dialogue with Marxists, with a view to better mutual understanding. Moltmann's fellow university teacher, Ernst Bloch, was a somewhat unorthodox Marxist, with an interest in the Bible, in Judaeo-Christian apocalyptic, especially its this-worldly aspects, and in the Anabaptist movement in Germany. His *Philosophy of Hope*, largely written during the Second World War, but revised in 1959,¹² had a major influence on Moltmann's thought.

But what of Liberation Theology itself? Certainly it originated and developed in a society where politics of the left were under strong Marxist influence. Latin America was the territory of Che

¹⁰ See especially J. Miguez Bonino, *Christians and Marxists: the Mutual Challenge of Revolution* (London, 1976).

¹¹ J. Andrew Kirk, *Theology Encounters Revolution* (Leicester, 1980), p. 43. He traces its first stirrings to the work of Richard Shaull, *Encounter with Revolution* (New York, 1955).

¹² *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt, 1959), ET 3 vols., Oxford 1986.

SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

Guevara and Fidel Castro, in which there would soon be the first freely elected Communist national leader, President Allende of Chile. But it is one thing to recognise this, and another to claim that the true motivation of the Liberation Theologians is Marxist philosophy. They may accept the Marxist analysis of history and critique of capitalism, but their true motivation could be love for the God whose very existence true Marxists deny.

It is not, of course, impossible that the motivation may itself be multiple. Moreover, Liberation Theology is not a monolithic theological stance, and its theological pace-makers do not agree about everything. It may well be that the demise of Marxism in its Eastern European heartland will serve to make clear in course of time what the deepest motives of particular Liberation Theologies really are. It is worth noting that there are real differences between Liberation Theology and orthodox Marxism. For example, as P. Berryman points out,¹³ Liberation Theologians do not identify with the genuine proletariat, the potential revolutionary class, but with the peasants and the urban poor, and they do so on Christian and not on Marxist principles.

We need to remember that the succession of theological schools that began with Schleiermacher and has continued to the present day has exhibited one consistent phenomenon of great interest. Each school has had two wings or at least exhibited two tendencies, the one more biblical and the other more philosophical. Two principles, at least partly if not wholly irreconcilable, have been contending for the mastery. The succession of schools has been largely due to philosophical changes. We should expect divergent tendencies within Liberation Theology too.

We should not, of course, forget Marx's own Jewish heritage. There is a touch of the prophet about his denunciations of the rich and likewise a touch of the apocalyptic preacher in his confident assertions of the triumph of the new society. In fact, a very broad definition of heresy could accommodate Marxism almost as easily as Islam. It is interesting, incidentally, that a book has recently been written entitled, *Towards a Jewish Theology of Liberation*.¹⁴

Of course Marxism itself has philosophical antecedents. It emerged as one of several reactions to Hegelianism, and, like most reactions, bears traces of the influence of its philosophical parent. In its totalitarianism, it has not altogether repudiated Hegel's idealist

¹³ *Liberation Theology* (London, 1987), p.33.

¹⁴ Marc H. Ellis, *Towards a Jewish Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY, 1987).

LIBERATION AND PROSPERITY THEOLOGIES

theory of the state, which, of course, is more fully represented in Fascism. The ultimate origins of this concept are found in Plato.¹⁵

Ideological Links of Prosperity Theology

- *Theological*

Prosperity Theology emerged from the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements. Each of these is a complex phenomenon and has too often been the subject of sweeping generalisations. One of the surprises that faces the student of the history of the Charismatic movement is the fact that some highly responsible Pentecostal leaders have been very critical of the newer movement, and have particularly stressed the need for it to learn from the experience, and especially the mistakes, of the earlier Pentecostals.

These movements, with their teaching on the gifts of the Spirit, have inevitably put some emphasis on the healing of the body. Special healing meetings and also healing sessions during ordinary worship services have characterised most churches of a Pentecostal or Charismatic persuasion, if not permanently or consistently, at least for a significant part of their history.

Such an emphasis can easily give rise to extremes, and some teachers of both schools have maintained both that the use of medicine should be repudiated by Christians and also that no Christian should be ill, but should claim perfect health by faith. In the more recent 'Signs and Wonders' movement some have maintained these positions. Unfortunately neither the Pentecostal nor the Charismatic movement has been strong on theology, although its members have had very definite convictions on the distinctive emphases of their movements.

Prosperity Theology has only come to general notice in the past decade or so, but in fact its origins are much earlier. The writer of this paper first became aware of this kind of teaching in an extreme form over twenty years ago in the magazines of T. L. Osborn. Dave Hunt traces it ultimately to the teaching of E. W. Kenyon and also in some respects to that of Norman Vincent Peale,¹⁶ both of whom were promoting their views before the Second World War. Unlike Liberation Theology, it is not easy to find its earlier theological links. Some might perhaps claim that it is an extreme product of Pietism, especially of the Arminian variety, with its stress on faith as a human activity. Certainly a Calvinistic background does not seem

¹⁵ See C.E.M. Joad, *Guide to the Philosophy of Morals and Politics* (London, 1947), chapters 15-18.

¹⁶ *Beyond Seduction* (Eugene, OR, 1987), chapters 3 and 4.

SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

to predispose Christians to this teaching, with its highly Arminian-style slogans such as 'name it and claim it' and 'have faith in your faith'.

– Philosophical and Non-Biblical

These links are of several kinds. Politically, Prosperity Theology predisposes its adherents to move to the right, for it is a kind of elitism. Of course, American Evangelical Christianity as a whole tends to be to the right of centre politically, Republican rather than Democratic, conservative rather than liberal.

Then there is psychotherapy. There is much emphasis on positive thinking and positive confession in the Prosperity movement and this is very similar to the type of psychotherapy associated with the name of Carl Rogers,¹⁷ which abhors any form of negative thinking.

Aspects of Prosperity Theology's 'Positive Confession'¹⁸ remind us strongly of Christian Science, which is in some ways more like a philosophy than a theology. Christian Science refuses to face facts, affirming the illusory nature of pain, much as the more extreme Prosperity teachers do. The pragmatic temper of Prosperity Theology may not reflect the influence of philosophical Pragmatism so much as the general pragmatic ethos of American society.

Theological Appraisal

Here we will first of all look at the two theologies together in the light of Scripture and then look at each separately before giving an appraising conclusion.

General Considerations Affecting Both Theologies

i. **We need to begin with the New Testament rather than the Old Testament.** This must be the right approach. We are the people of the fulfilment, not of the promise, of the consummation not of the commencement, we are Christians not Jews. We accept the whole Bible as God's Word, but the New Testament must be our guide for interpreting the whole.

ii. **We need to emphasise what the New Testament emphasises.** There can be no doubt that the emphasis of the New Testament is on the gospel, the good news, of Christ crucified and risen and of forgiveness by grace through faith in him. C. H. Dodd showed very

¹⁷ See, for example, Carl Rogers, *A Way of Becoming* (New York, 1980).

¹⁸ A full presentation of this view from a leading prosperity teacher is Kenneth Hagin, *Having Faith in your Faith* (Tulsa, OK, 1980).

LIBERATION AND PROSPERITY THEOLOGIES

clearly in *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*¹⁹ that one great *kerigma* binds the whole New Testament together. Despite later attempts to refute this, a strong case can still be made out in support of Dodd's thesis. Salvation from sin through Christ is the main thrust of the New Testament gospel.

iii. **The God of the Old Testament and New Testament is one God and the gospel is to be understood in the light of the Old Testament.** This will balance our first point. The earlier stages of God's dealings with his people both were valuable in their own right and also pointed to the final revelation in the New Testament. Old Testament promises, types, symbols, terms and concepts are all employed in the New Testament with reference to Christ and so they enable us to interpret his significance. There is no doubt that both these types of theology make us take the Old Testament more seriously. This is a refreshing change from types of liberalism which greatly devalue the Old Testament.

iv. **The central historical emphasis of the Old Testament is on the Exodus from Egypt and the Entry into Canaan.** This great double act of God's grace corresponds for the Old Testament to the way the cross and resurrection provide the historical centre of the New Testament. This means then that the two themes of liberation and prosperity are central to the Old Testament. The people were delivered from the grievous bondage and oppression of Egypt and brought into a good land flowing with milk and honey.

They were called to trust and obey. As the God of the Exodus he was to be trusted, as the God of the land he was to be obeyed. So long as they were faithful to him the land with all its material blessings was theirs, but persistent disobedience and apostasy brought exclusion from these temporal blessings.

v. **The social and physical values of the Old Testament are not negated but embraced in the ultimate salvation promised in the New Testament.** The *eschaton* in both Testaments has a social as well as an individual dimension. There is to be a community of people redeemed from every consequence of sin, spiritual, physical and social, and therefore brought into the ultimately prosperous society. Our redemption draws near,²⁰ our salvation is nearer than when we first believed,²¹ and we shall enjoy all the good of God's holy city, into which the glory of the nations has come,²² and where Christ himself is the Light.

¹⁹ *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (London, 1951).

²⁰ Luke 21:28.

²¹ Rom. 13:11.

²² Rev. 21:4, 24-26; 22:1-5.

SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

What all this will mean in actual experience we can only dimly discern but enough has been told us to make us realise that it is the transfiguration, not the denial, of human life in its totality, both spiritual and physical, both individual and social. Here is the ultimate fulfilment of the Old Testament, in which every scrap of its significance is gathered up and glorified in Christ.

vi. **The principle of realised eschatology would lead us to expect some anticipation of the fulness of liberation and prosperity in this present life.** The New Testament shows us the powers of the age to come at work through Christ, the King of that age,²³ and it uses salvation (*i.e.* liberation) terminology and prosperity (*e.g.* 'peace, well-being') terminology, applying it to those who experience those powers through Christ²⁴ and his apostles. For example, Paul advises slaves to accept freedom if they are offered it because this reflects their status as the Lord's freedmen.²⁵

vii. **We would expect the full realisation both of liberation and of prosperity to await the Second Advent.** This in fact is what we see in the Book of the Revelation. The ultimate society is free of anything that would bind the redeemed or limit their joy.²⁶ The heart of the ultimate state is spiritual, but its repercussions are extremely wide-ranging.

Liberation Theology and the New Testament

i. **Some of its criticisms of traditional theology are appropriate.** This has to be admitted. Theology has often been too abstract, too removed from the practical concerns of the church or of the ordinary Christian. Just as James Denney declared that he had no interest at all in a theology that could not be preached, so we need also to remember that 'sound doctrine' in the Pastoral Epistles is really healthy doctrine, *i.e.* doctrine that makes for healthy Christian living.

The writers of the New Testament were the first Christian theologians, and there can be no doubt that they were all fully committed to the truth they taught. Although theology is a serious academic discipline it should never be pursued in detachment from life. The theologian needs to relate to the truth of God with his whole being.

²³ Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20.

²⁴ *E.g.* in Mark 5:34, a literal translation would be 'Daughter, your faith has saved you; go into peace.' Here then liberation and well-being terminology are used together.

²⁵ 1 Cor. 7:21, 22.

²⁶ See n. 22 above.

LIBERATION AND PROSPERITY THEOLOGIES

ii. **The New Testament shows God's continuing concern for the poor and oppressed.** The emphasis on God's concern for the poor and oppressed is particularly to be found in the Gospel of Luke,²⁷ but also elsewhere²⁸ and especially in a passage in James which might have come straight out of Amos or Micah.²⁹ The New Testament's emphasis on spiritual salvation should not cause us to overlook this.

Hans Kvalbein has, however, argued persuasively that the first two Beatitudes are both based on Isaiah 61:1-2, which he declares to be a programmatic text for Jesus. He says, 'When we look at the content and the wider context of Isaiah 61 it is evident that the promise refers to Israel as a whole. It does not refer to a limited group of economically poor within the people, nor does it refer to all the poor and the destitute in the world. These expressions describe the humiliation and the poor conditions in the Babylonian exile for the people of Israel and cannot be taken literally.'³⁰

iii. **The terminology of salvation is sometimes expressed in political or military terms,**³¹ yet this appears to be the use of the older language to express the newer concerns. A careful examination of the passages concerned yields this conclusion. Consider, for example, the words of Luke 1:77 and compare also Luke 1:47 taken in the context of the Magnificat as a whole. Zechariah and Mary may be saying that the Saviour God of the Old Testament who saved his people from their enemies and who turned society upside down has finally acted in spiritual salvation. On the other hand they may simply be using the old language actually to express the new acts by the principle of analogy. In either case, the main point is that the language does not appear to be employed literally of acts of God performed within the New Testament economy.

This language therefore serves for us to underline the links, spiritual and typological, between the Old Testament which gave birth to it and the New Testament which now employs it for salvation in a spiritual dimension.

iv. **Liberation Theology is very difficult to support from the New Testament.** From time to time a theology emerges which has certain attractive features, but which appears to have very little, if any,

²⁷ Luke 1:53; 4:18; 6:20-25; 12:33; 16:19ff; 19:8.

²⁸ Matt. 19:21; 25:31-46; Acts 6:1ff; 9:36ff; 11:27-30; Rom. 12:8; 1 Cor. 16:1ff.

²⁹ James 5:1-6; cf. 2:15,16.

³⁰ 'Jesus and The Poor: Two Texts and a Tentative Conclusion', *Themelios* 12 (1987), p.80.

³¹ Notably in Luke 1:68-73.

SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

express New Testament warrant. The 'vicarious penitence' view of the atonement is an example of this, and it has to be said that Liberation Theology is another.

v. **Its use of Scripture is often open to question.** It has been well said that it appears to find its gospel more in Exodus than in Romans, and, of course, it is in Exodus only if God's redemptive acts for Israel may be taken as a paradigm for other nations under oppression.

vi. **The New Testament encourages concern for the poor and oppressed but not in consequence the overshadowing of the gospel of spiritual liberation.** The Theology of Liberation movement is as open to the same problem as beset the Social Gospel – the overshadowing, almost at times to the point of exclusion, of the spiritual by the social. It may well be that the popular titles employed by each movement are unhelpful in this regard, for they tend to focus attention on the social dimension, thus encouraging Christians to place an emphasis which is not fully biblical.

Prosperity Theology and the New Testament

i. **The incarnation was an embracing of poverty and servitude by the Son of God.** He was born into a poor home. Carpentry was an honourable occupation, but the family could afford only the poor person's offering in celebration of the birth of Jesus.³² His life-style was the very opposite of prosperous,³³ and he called his disciples to a similar life-style in their service for him.³⁴ Moreover he embraced not only the office of a Servant to God (which he accepted gladly) but also lived in a society that was under the heel of a foreign oppressor.

ii. **Christians may be called to embrace poverty as Christ did,³⁵ while paradoxically, their obedience is to be rewarded by prosperity.³⁶** The two lines of teaching here are not easy to reconcile. The New Testament language forbids us to apply the promises only to life after death, but it may be that they are really promises of compensation, which is always true, whether or not it is strictly in terms of material prosperity.

This encourages the two spiritual dispositions of sacrifice and gratitude, both of which should find place in the heart of the

³² Luke 2:22, 23; cf. Lev. 12:8.

³³ Matt. 8:19, 20.

³⁴ Matt. 10:8-14.

³⁵ 2 Cor. 6:4ff; 11:27; cf. Heb. 11:32ff.

³⁶ Matt. 19: 27-30.

LIBERATION AND PROSPERITY THEOLOGIES

Christian. It also encourages dependence and contentment,³⁷ for, whether we are poor or rich, we owe all our possessions to the goodness of God.

iii. **Divinely-given prosperity has in view our greater giving potential, both to the poor³⁸ and to Christian workers.³⁹** So the New Testament has an important emphasis on stewardship. We are not blessed for our own sakes, but for others who may benefit from what God has given us.⁴⁰

iv. **Motivation in our giving is all-important.** It is just here that the appeal of much Prosperity Theology literature is so untrue to the New Testament. There is, without doubt, an appeal to avarice and a desire for pampering. No matter how much the need for Christian giving is emphasised, the motive is usually seen to be the reaping of a bountiful harvest from the seeds planted through Christian giving.⁴¹ In fact, the New Testament teaches that we are to give as to the Lord, without hoping for return.⁴²

v. **Christians should seek heavenly rather than earthly riches.** This point is made emphatically in the teaching of our Lord.⁴³ We are in fact a colony of heaven,⁴⁴ regenerate men and women whose proper home is in the new creation but who are to demonstrate the triumph of the grace of God meantime within the context of the old creation. This will be done largely by showing new creation values in our lifestyle and motivation. In fact it is made clear that riches may impoverish us spiritually⁴⁵ while material poverty may in fact be a means of opening us to spiritual riches.⁴⁶

vi. **A society defiant of God and devoted to material values will come under his judgement.** In the Book of the Revelation, two cities appear, the new Jerusalem, owing its freedom and well-being

³⁷ Matt. 6:11, 25-34; Phil. 4:10ff. 1 Tim. 6:6-10.

³⁸ Acts 4:32-36; 9:36ff; 1 Cor. 16:1ff; Eph. 4:28.

³⁹ 1 Cor. 9:4ff.

⁴⁰ 2 Cor. 8,9 is a major passage focusing on this theme.

⁴¹ E.g. the contents page (the front cover) of the Oral Roberts book mentioned in n. 6 above includes chapters entitled, 'How two young men through applying the principles of seed-faith became Tulsa's third-largest builders' and 'How a friend got his dream job through applying the key principles of the blessing-pact'.

⁴² Luke 6:35.

⁴³ Matt. 6:19-21, 24; Luke 12:33; 18:18ff.

⁴⁴ Moffatt's translation of Phil. 3:20.

⁴⁵ Luke 12:13-21; James 5:1ff.

⁴⁶ James 2:5.

SCOTTISH BULLETIN OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

to God's grace, and Babylon, given up to the pursuit of worldly values. This will experience the sharpness of judgement from God.

Conclusion

We have discovered that both Liberation and Prosperity Theology emphasise themes that are central to the Old Testament, and that in fact they represent the two sides of the one great historical fact in the Old Testament, for the Exodus is never separated from the promise of the land, or *vice versa*. The two facts are therefore not independent but interlocked, as are the cross and the resurrection of Jesus.

It is assumed by both schools that the Old Testament events concerned constitute a paradigm for the church in modern society. The New Testament does not support this, although it recognises both that full liberation and full prosperity are eschatological realities and that their physical and social dimensions may have some realisation in the interim period between the advents.

Here we see that the most important theological task facing evangelical Christians today is to seek together a better understanding of the relationship between the two Testaments. Most of the major differences between us are due to different ways of conceiving this relationship.

The terms 'Liberation Theology' and 'Prosperity Theology' are themselves unhelpful, because they serve to underline aspects of truth which, for the New Testament, are subsidiary to the message of spiritual liberation and spiritual prosperity in Christ.

Evangelical Christians should incorporate insights from both schools into their outlook in a biblically balanced way, while continuing to emphasise the gospel and its fundamentally spiritual nature as these are indicated in the New Testament.

To close on a practical note, it is very important for us to realise that crucifixion and resurrection are not only in the New Testament the heart of objective Christianity, the preached message, but that they also constitute there the heart of subjective Christianity, the Christian life.⁴⁷ Here then is the life-style which glorifies God, and which will result in true freedom and prosperity, not only for the person who adopts it by grace, but also for those he or she serves for Christ's sake.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Luke 9:32; Rom. 6. The link between Christ's death and resurrection and our acceptance of this principle is strikingly brought out in John 12:23-26.

⁴⁸ 2 Cor. 4:7-12.