

**Reclaiming the Prophetic:
Toward a Theology of Hope and Justice in a Fragmented World**

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“Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to God’s self through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to God’s self, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.”

II Corinthians 5:18-19

I am tremendously honored to share with you this morning as we begin another semester at Louisville Seminary. I would like to thank my family and friends for joining me in this occasion, and to express my appreciation to Professor J. Deotis Roberts and his wife, Elizabeth, for their continued support and presence here as well. To the president, my fellow faculty colleagues, students, staff and administrators, and friends, thank you for your unprecedented hospitality that you’ve shown my family and I.

For the moments we have together this morning, my hope is to reflect on the ways in which the deep roots of the prophetic Christian heritage introduce the language of hope and justice as dominant themes that hold particular meaning for confronting contemporary manifestations of human suffering and fragmentation in local and global spaces. I begin with the basic assumption that the quest for justice and reconciliation stand at the center of the theological task. As the creator, God’s concern is without boundaries. Which means that God is not only concerned with personal transformation and individual human fulfillment, but also establishing social, political and economic orders that reflects the life of God. From this perspective, I believe that structural and systematic issues like poverty, healthcare, incarceration, HIV/AIDs, globalization and

escalating militarism must begin to take center stage in theological discourse and in reflections on the nature and mission of the Church in the world.

The idea of reclaiming the prophetic dimensions of the Christian heritage arises from the fact that God calls us to think and act in relation to all spheres of human experience—social, political, economic, and religious. A critical question at work is what does it mean to be Christian in the context of social systems and structures that devalue and demean human life? My point of departure is the belief that because God is the God of all creation, there are no spaces beyond God's redeeming love. God's love is not passive but active and transformative. Through the reconciling work of God in Christ, Christians are called to be agents of reconciliation and social transformation, called to participate in what God is doing in the world.

In particular, examining the question of justice and community is further complicated by the critical questions illuminated in postmodern theological discourse. Inasmuch as it deals with the cultural problem of nihilism, capitalistic desire, and the progressive lure of technology. Constructions of Christian identity are now informed by mass media and technological communication, transcontinental travel, shifting patterns of urbanization, and the incredible marketing machinery of Madison Avenue. I would agree with Gianni Vattimo who observed that the notion of progress now comes under the guise of technological advances. So with the development of every new gadget, cell phone, ipod, or domestic piece, is a perception of progress and forward progression. But there is evidence to suggest that with all of the technological progress, very little progress has been made when it comes to poverty, healthcare, the incarcerated, education, and the continuous onslaught of global war and nuclear proliferation. In fact, according to

sociologist William Julius Wilson, the level of poverty (particularly in America's urban centers) has continued to escalate since 1970 and has now reached unprecedented levels.¹ On a global scale, the crisis is even more disturbing. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), about 1.2 billion people now live in extreme poverty (living on an equivalency of less than a dollar a day).² Millions are locked out of the economic process due to a lack of capital that is necessary in order to participate in the current global marketing system. What is at stake is a fair market system that values human life and is socially responsible, while at the same time providing the space for innovation and autonomy.

Justice

The challenges that confront oppressed peoples, particularly the poor, serve as a contextual perspective for building a constructive and prophetic theology of justice. Although the various theologies of liberation have experienced extensive criticisms in recent years for its Marxist overtones and appeals to social theory, it has nevertheless served as an important reminder of the need to listen to the voices on the margins, in the shadows, and at the periphery to understand what justice means and that a fundamental task of the Church is to live out God's vision of peace, justice, and community.

At the center of this question is the language of justice and exactly what constitutes justice. Certainly, in today's time the question of justice is often debated and wrought with controversy as one attempts to navigate the tensions between personal responsibility and social culpability. Aquinas offers a helpful distinction regarding

¹ William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears* (New York: Vintage Press).

² <http://www.who.int/hdp/poverty/en/>

justice. First, for Aquinas there are two kinds of justice—commutative justice and distributive justice. Commutative justice refers to the direct exchange of goods and services. It applies to the temporal and material reality of daily existence. Commutative justice is isolated to solely the process of buying and selling. Distributive justice relates to the equal distribution of resources consistent with the being itself. Aquinas argues that God's justice maybe seen as distributive since God defines what justice is and because it is consistent with whom God is. God is lovingly just. Because God is love, the kind of justice God demands is conditioned by God's love and concern for all of creation.

While Aquinas' perspective on justice gives theological texture to understanding justice in relation to God, we must look to a historical and contextual framework for a theology of justice that speaks to oppressed peoples. John deGruchy's characterization of justice in South Africa is perhaps more illuminating. Throughout the anti-apartheid struggle, the Church was faced with the difficult task of discerning which approach to assume—either retributive justice that seeks equal restitution or restorative justice (which seeks community and nation building as its primary interest).

Howard Thurman pointed out many years ago that the African American experience with God, in particular, has always been concerned with Christian life in the early church. They have preferred more often than not an earthly Jesus, one who identifies with the suffering, wounds, scares and hurts of an oppressed people. They had little regard for a conception of God that is aloft or unfamiliar with their suffering. Jesus, therefore, as the depiction of God in human form, was for them, the God who comes to bring not merely soul salvation, but salvation of the body, liberation from social, political and economic forces of dehumanization.

To recover a sense of the "prophetic" also means addressing the epistemological underpinnings of modern culture. In short, we must begin to address not only what we do and think in the west, but also raise questions of why we do what we do. The footprints of figures like Martin Luther King, Jr., Desmond Tutu, Mother Teresa, and Oscar Romero gives us clues not only as examples of faithful Christian witness, but also how to do theology. Their witness reflects a theological method that responds to the pluralistic postmodern reservations that call into question any theological or religious systems that claims hegemonic privileges over all others. These figures present a pragmatic theological approach where God-talk becomes meaningful and transformative as it speaks to the suffering and hope of the downtrodden and marginalized. John Howard Yoder provides a helpful summary with the question, "How do we live in such a way that makes what we believe meaningful to the lives of those who suffer?"³

These voices challenge the more Cartesian and Hegelian models of philosophical and theological discourse, which has imbedded in its language a hegemonic bias toward rationalism and personal autonomy. When, in the seventeenth century, René Decartes proclaimed that personal autonomy and individual reason are the marks of what it means to be human, he denied the inherent social nature of human life. Reading Hegel's *Philosophy of History* closely gives insights to the foundational systems at work in theology emerging from the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century. These ideas provided theological and philosophical credence to support systems of exploitation and imperialism on a massive scale.

³ This questioned is quoted from a lecture on John Howard Yoder by Stanley Hauerwas at Duke University Divinity School who argued that the question runs throughout Yoder's thought and is a guiding theme in his work. See also, John Howard Yoder's *The Royal Priesthood: Essays, Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, edited by Michael G. Cartwright (Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 1998).

However, the de-centering of Europe beginning in the mid-twentieth century and changes in global trade and political landscapes contributed to the kinds of liberationist movements in Third world countries. Whereas once Germany, France, and Britain were the epicenters of theological language, we now see a turn toward Asia, Africa and Latin America as the seat of Christian expansion and theological discourse. This is primarily due to the ongoing work expressed in various theologies of liberation. Though not exclusively, they articulate the fact that those considered at the center, meaning members of developed nations (primarily in the West) must take serious the voices on the margins or on the periphery of social, political, and economic power and hegemony.

Constructing a theology of justice also means integrating a prophetic imperative—meaning speaking truth to power and to engage in a progressive and unapologetic social agenda for change. Within the last twenty years, several Kairos documents have emerged which have issued a prophetic call for the church to respond to the social and structural realities that impact those on the margins. The first of these was the Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church, which appeared in South Africa in 1985. *The Kairos Central America* appeared in 1988, and *The Road to Damascus: Kairos and Conversion* was developed in 1989, a collaborative effort of South African, Asian, and Central American origins.⁴ An earlier example of documents similar to Kairos, was a *status confessionis*, a response of the Confessing Church in Germany where it essentially declared that supporting Hitler was in direct contradiction to what it means to be Christian. This message was communicated in the Barmen Declaration document, issued in May 1934, primarily written by the Swiss theologian, Karl Barth. Documents such as

⁴ Robert McAfee Brown, Editor, *Kairos: Three Prophetic Challenges to the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 2.

these served as a prophetic call for the church to bear witness to collective and structural evils.

Written in the context of the antiapartheid struggle in South Africa, the South African Kairos document depicts the urgent nature of understanding the historical situation that compels believers toward action. "Kairos is the Greek word that is used in the Bible to designate a special moment of time when God visits [God's] people to offer them a unique opportunity for repentance and conversion, for change and decisive action. It is a time of judgment. It is a moment of truth, a crisis."⁵

These sentiments are further illuminated in Kairos Central America document, when they write: "Central America has become a Kairos of unforeseeable consequences: either we close the door on the possibility of hope for the poor for many years, or as prophets we open up a new Day for humanity and thus for the Church."⁶

The vast majority of Christians outside of the United States now live in poverty and consider the current social environment as one of crisis and survival. For many, God is a God of the poor who seeks to liberate them from not only the moral and spiritual elements that restrict their ways of being, but also the systematic forces that inform their life of faith.

Many liberation theologians have tended to focus on the crucifixion as the meeting place of divine concern and human suffering. It has come to represent for those who suffer as the God who reveals God's self as the One who suffers with the feeble, broken and disquieted bodies of marginalized and oppressed peoples. Christ's sufferings, therefore, are recognized as a form of vindication and divine companionship for the

⁵ *Kairos: Challenge to the Church*, written in the Explanatory notes.

⁶ *Kairos Central America*, Para. 86.

abandoned, abused, neglected and exploited. The Cross embodies the recognition of a God who identifies with those who suffer. Particularly within the frameworks of Latin American liberation theologies and Black theologies of liberation, the Cross has become the lens by which to understand how God champions the cause of liberation. It reveals whom God ultimately stands with and how God chooses to reconcile God's world.

Hope

Any theological perspective on justice that does not include hope is insufficient because hope sustains and inspires justice. Justice motivates and inspires hope. Hope suggests that the story is untold, that there is more to the story. Building a constructive theology of justice also means thinking about a theology of hope that is contextual. Hope is the reservoir that funds the quest for justice since it presupposes a vision or image of what could be. In the Christian tradition, hope has been historically understood in the area of the eschatological vision of God's ultimate redemption and transformation of the world, as well as reflections on the Kingdom of God. The mid-century theologies of hope inspired by such voices as the German theologian Jurgen Moltmann and Latin American liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez is useful in today's fragmented world only inasmuch as they give specificity to what the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God means for the oppressed.

The more familiar evangelical-pietistic version of hope preoccupied with a future hope in the afterlife to escape hell does little for those who currently experience a "living-hell" in the present. For instance, reflecting on the black experience, J. Deotis Roberts provides a graphic and illustrative summary when he observed at the height of the Black

power movement in America, “Heaven as a reward at some unforeseeable future time brings little hope to the hungry and mistreated black person. Hell-future makes little impression upon blacks living in hell-present of shacks, rats, roaches, hunger, unemployment, and inhuman treatment.”⁷ Roberts’ account of hope, though constrained with the perimeters of the black experienced, may also be useful in understanding the meaning of hope for other oppressed groups as well. Serious reflection on what God is doing to make life more humane in the present is the basis for fully understanding what God intends to do in the age to come.

An example could also be seen when in 1956, Martin Luther King, Jr. stood on the doorsteps of his mangled home after a bombing just days after the beginning of the Montgomery Bus boycott. After being interrupted in a speech at a mass rally and pondering the thought of injury to his wife and newborn daughter, Yolanda, King spoke to bewildered voices of anger and dissent, announcing that “unearned suffering is redemptive,” which the crowd knew all too well what King was referring to. It meant that the ability to endure and struggle with current realities of suffering arises from the belief that God hears and responds to the cries of the oppressed; and that suffering for the cause of justice will be vindicated both in the present and future.

Reconciliation

Finally, assuming the constructive task of developing meaningful theologies of justice and hope within today’s context must be grounded in a commitment to the process of reconciliation. Justice and hope as joint themes do not stand outside of reconciliation but remain at the center. The classical doctrine of reconciliation has emphasized

⁷ J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books), 84.

justification and sanctification as central themes. I would agree with Preston Williams, however, who has suggested that the classical doctrine of reconciliation does little in the way of challenging structures that perpetuate systems of oppression. Nevertheless, there is a critical need to explore the contours of the doctrine of sanctification because it attends to human agency. As depicted in the reading, “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto God’s self” thus giving Christians the ministry of reconciliation. The question then, is not what God has done in Christ, but what does it mean to live up to the calling of Christian identity as agents of reconciliation.

Reconciliation is also a prophetic undertaking because it challenges the cultural norms of individualism, isolation and fragmentation. Through the process of reconciliation, the dignity and personhood of individuals is recognized and celebrated through community and otherness. The African and African American perspective has much to teach the world when it comes to reconciliation. In spite of centuries of violent oppression and hostility, African peoples have by in large responded nonviolently and with an expressed commitment to forgiveness and restorative justice.

Specifically, the work of reconciliation in South Africa is an important example of the ways in which reconciliation also functions as a method of social, political and economic transformation. Admittedly, there are still a great many problems that plague South Africans in a post-apartheid environment. In fact, land ownership, economic disparities, and a series of health related concerns remain top priority for the church and state. At the same time, the vast majority black South African population now has the opportunity to participate, through the democratic process, in their own future and destiny as a people. Lessons can be taken from Tutu’s notion of ubuntu theology that challenges

notions of rationalism and autonomy. It suggests that human fulfillment and theological understandings are made possible through our relationship with the other.

Reconciliation is an urgent antidote to the violence and conflict we now see in our world, from the escalating gang violence in the urban ghettos of California to the battlefields of Basra and Baghdad. Reconciliation remains the Church's greatest challenge and its greatest hope for our time.