

# Editorial

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During the past year The Paternoster Press celebrated its jubilee as a Christian publishing house. *The Evangelical Quarterly* owes an untold debt to the initiative of Mr. B. Howard Mudditt and his colleagues at TPP for the way in which they took over its publication at a time when this action cannot have been other than an expression of faith in the continued existence of a journal which had had an uncertain career. The continued faith of the publishers in the journal and the cause for which it stands has been further demonstrated in the jubilee year by the new appearance of the journal and its increase in size. We continue to be grateful for the enterprise and support of our publishers and extend to them our best wishes for the next fifty years — if the Lord tarry (as they say in Brethren circles). And as we also extend good wishes for the New Year to all our contributors and readers we would claim your continued prayerful support for the task of biblical and theological scholarship which is undertaken in *The Evangelical Quarterly*.

R. T. France

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## Liberation in the New Testament

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*The validity of such movements as 'liberation theology' is ultimately to be tested by their fidelity to the Word of God in the Scriptures. Dr. France, who lectures in New Testament in London Bible College, gives us such an assessment in this essay.*

### 1. Jesus and the Kingdom of God

The *pax romana* was a good thing, but we should not let its virtues blind us to the fact that life in the provinces of the Roman empire was no utopia. In Palestine, where Christianity was born, there were political, economic and social grievances sufficient to spark off a series of bloody revolts against the 'enlightened' government of Rome and, more important, its often less enlightened local representatives. The New Testament was written against the background of a society seething with discontent, and accustomed

to brutality and injustice which are matched in few parts of the world today.<sup>1</sup>

It is against this background that the attitude of Jesus to the revolutionary movements of his day must be assessed. Strenuous efforts have been made to identify Jesus as the would-be leader of a violent revolution, a precursor of the Zealot leaders who a generation later plunged Palestine into the disastrous 'war of liberation' which culminated in the Roman destruction of Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> Nowadays, however, it is generally agreed that such a position can be maintained only by both discarding most of the more direct evidence available (that of the gospels) and also flying in the face of historical probability. Jesus, it would now be generally accepted, was no Zealot — indeed he took pains to dissociate himself publicly from the revolutionary option.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the discussion of the standard texts, it is important that we set the question against the background of some of the more distinctive emphases of Jesus' life and teaching, which effectively put him at odds with violent revolution in general and with the Zealot position in particular. Without at this point going into any detail, we might suitably note the following themes, which are documented elsewhere:

(i). Jesus conceived of his rôle as Messiah in terms of the restoration of the relationship between man and God, not in terms of national aspirations or of political liberation; and he saw the appointed means as suffering and death, not conquest.<sup>4</sup>

(ii). His views on the place of the Jewish nation in the purposes of God, and his repeated warnings of God's judgement on it as a political institution, are in striking contrast with Zealot ideals.<sup>5</sup>

(iii). His constant stress on love, even of enemies, and on

<sup>1</sup> So e.g. M. Hengel, *Victory over Violence* (ET, London: SPCK, 1975) 71f, summarising the detailed account in previous chapters.

<sup>2</sup> Most notably, but by no means exclusively, by S. G. F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots* (Manchester University Press, 1967).

<sup>3</sup> See especially the series of discussions by M. Hengel: in addition to *Victory over Violence* (note 1), see his *Was Jesus a Revolutionist?* (ET, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971); *Christ and Power* (ET, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977). Also A. Richardson, *The Political Christ* (London: SCM, 1973). More briefly, Myrtle Langley, 'Jesus and Revolution' in C. Brown (ed.) *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978) vol. 3, 967–981; also my *The Man They Crucified* (Leicester, IVP, 1975) chapter 8. For extensive scholarly discussion of Brandon's thesis see the recent symposium *Jesus and the Politics of his Day*, ed. E. Bammel and C. F. D. Moule (CUP, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> See my conclusion in *Jesus and the Old Testament* (London: Tyndale Press, 1971), 148–150.

<sup>5</sup> See below pp. 18f.

unlimited forgiveness contrasts sharply with the philosophy of hatred which underlies most revolutionary movements.<sup>6</sup>

This is well-trodden ground. My purpose in this article, however, is not to produce another critique of *Jesus and the Zealots* but rather to consider on a broader front, and in more positive terms, what Jesus' mission was, rather than what it was not. In particular, we shall be considering how far the language of 'liberation' is appropriate to describe what Jesus came to achieve.

The term which Jesus used most frequently to denote the new order which he had come to bring, the purpose of his mission, is 'the kingdom of God'.<sup>7</sup> The English translation is unfortunate in that it suggests a political unit, whereas the Greek *basileia* refers to the act of reigning, the situation where God is in control, God's 'reign' or 'sovereignty'. Under this phrase Jesus speaks of many different aspects of his work, so that it becomes a very general designation of 'the state of affairs which God intends' and which it is Jesus' purpose to bring about. He speaks of the kingdom of God as something which is near (Mk. 1:15; Lk. 10:9, 11), which should be sought (Mt. 6:33) and which one may enter (Mk. 9:47; Mt. 5:20; 7:21; Jn. 3:5) or be near to (Mk. 12:34), but which can also be shut up (Mt. 23:13; cf. 16:19) or taken away (Mt. 21:43). It is preached (Mt. 24:14; Lk. 4:43; 9:60), it is forced (Mt. 11:12), it comes secretly (Lk. 17:20) and it will come in power (Mk. 9:1). It is to be looked forward to (Mt. 6:10; cf. Lk. 19:11) and yet it is already 'among you' (Lk. 17:21). It is only for the committed (Lk. 9:62), for children and those who are like children (Mk. 10:14f), for the poor in spirit and the persecuted (Mt. 5:3, 10); the poor disciple possesses it (Lk. 6:20), but the rich man can enter it only with difficulty (Mk. 10:23-25). It is above all a mystery (Mk. 4:11) which may take men unawares (Mt. 12:28).

But *what is it?* The list of characteristics above should be enough to show that a simple answer is not going to do justice to the teaching of Jesus. In fact it is seldom that anything approaching a definition or even description of the kingdom of God is given in the gospels. It is apparently parallel to righteousness (Mt. 6:33), and to the accomplishment of God's will (Mt. 6:10). Sometimes, however, it seems to refer to the future state of those who please God (Mt. 8:11; 13:43). It is characteristically described in parables: 'the kingdom of God is like . . .'. But these parables sometimes refer to the preaching and penetration

<sup>6</sup> See Hengel, *Victory over Violence*, 75-76, n.103; Richardson, *op. cit.* 46-7.

<sup>7</sup> 'Kingdom of heaven' in Matthew is, of course, simply a stylistic variation. There is no difference in meaning or use.

of the gospel (Mk. 4:26ff, 30ff; Mt. 13:33), sometimes to the present experience of the convert (Mt. 13:44–46) or his obligations (Mt. 18:23ff), sometimes to men's ultimate fate (Mt. 13:24ff, 47–50; 20:1ff; 22:2ff; 25:1ff).

All this points to the truth of Norman Perrin's argument that 'kingdom of God' is not a concept or idea with a single dictionary definition, but a 'tensive symbol', by which he means a phrase which may have a wide range of meanings or points of reference, and whose function is rather to evoke a certain complex of ideas related to the overall purpose of God than to refer to any specific concept, or event, or state of affairs.<sup>8</sup> If this is so, we must beware of simplistic assertions that the kingdom of God is 'all about' heaven, or 'all about' a conversion experience, or 'all about' a future cataclysmic event, or 'all about' social justice for the poor. It is a general expression for the purposes of God as they are focused in the ministry of Jesus, and any drawing of ethical or theological principles from this expression is only valid if it can be justified from the NT account of Jesus' ministry and teaching, not on the basis of a presumed 'meaning' of 'kingdom of God'.

In this context, then, it is not legitimate to claim, as is often done, that Jesus' use of the expression 'kingdom of God' demonstrates his concern with political liberation, or with the restructuring of society, or with an other-worldly life-style or with any other specific ethical ideal. More specific evidence is needed of what his aims were.

It should be noted also that the kingdom of God is almost always spoken of as an active subject — it 'comes', etc. — or as something already existing, with which men may identify themselves by 'entering into' it. We may seek it and pray for its consummation, but it is not something which is brought about by human effort, even by obedience to the will of God. The old liberal idea, sometimes echoed in modern discussion, of men bringing the kingdom of God on earth has no basis in the gospels.<sup>9</sup>

'Kingdom of God' is not, then, a promising approach to the social and political implications of Jesus' ministry. We must look more widely at the emphases displayed in his life and teaching.

Helmut Gollwitzer<sup>10</sup> argues that Jesus, despite his dissociation

<sup>8</sup> N. Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), especially 29–34.

<sup>9</sup> For a fuller discussion of the implications of the phrase 'the kingdom of God' and of the dangers involved in misappropriating it in modern usage, see my article 'The Church and the Kingdom of God' in D. A. Carson (ed.) *Hermeneutics and the Church* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> 'Liberation in History', *Interpretation* 28 (1974), 404–421, especially 410–411.

from Zealot ideals, was revolutionary in the sense that he overturned existing values, thus precipitating an ultimate transformation of power structures, property relations, social conventions, etc. Whether or not this lighting of the fuse for explosions which might occur centuries later is what most of us would call 'revolution', the point is important. Jesus did preach and practise values in relation to society, race, and wealth, and indeed on the basic ethical issues of law-keeping and the will of God, which were uncomfortably radical,<sup>11</sup> and of which we are still only beginning to explore the practical implications. The time-bombs which he planted have been exploding in Christian-inspired social and political reform and in life-styles which have challenged society ever since, and they continue to do so in an exhilarating way today as Christians re-examine some of their inherited traditions of discipleship.

But how far does this 'bouleversement of the value scale'<sup>12</sup> add up to an endorsement of modern liberation theology? How did Jesus envisage his 'revolution' of values coming about? Has this anything to do with the struggle for political freedom today?

A disciple who takes the practice and teaching of Jesus as a practical guide for living will always be, simply by what he is, conspicuous and a challenge to the accepted values of society. A disciple group which consciously sets itself to live by Jesus' values will inevitably develop a 'counter-culture'. Did Jesus then aim to set up such a visible alternative as a means to overturn the existing system?

Luke records his stated programme as

'to preach good news to the poor.

. . . to proclaim release to the captives

and recovering of sight to the blind,

to set at liberty those who are oppressed,

to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.' (Lk. 4:18f; from Is. 61:1f)

While traditional Christian exegesis has interpreted these words in terms of spiritual release, some recent interpreters take them more literally, and specifically regard the 'acceptable year' as the OT jubilee, which Jesus campaigned to have literally observed, resulting in a redistribution of wealth and a new socio-economic deal for the poor.<sup>13</sup> The literal jubilee has not convinced many

<sup>11</sup> For a brief survey of some of these values see my *The Man They Crucified* 80-106.

<sup>12</sup> Gollwitzer, *art. cit.* 411.

<sup>13</sup> So especially J. H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), especially pp. 34-40, 64-77; following A. Trocmé, *Jesus Christ and the Non-Violent Revolution* (Geneva, 1961; ET, Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1974).

students of the gospels, but the view that Jesus not only preached new values but also set out a specific programme for socio-economic reform has been welcomed by some. I have attempted to examine this suggestion in some detail with reference to Jesus' teaching on wealth,<sup>14</sup> and have concluded that for all the undeniably radical implications of the values Jesus inculcated, the gospels do not support the view that he advocated or even countenanced any specific programme to change the existing socio-economic system. In other words, he was radical without being revolutionary (as I understand the term, to refer to the forcible overthrow of the *status quo*). His followers were and are at liberty to draw practical conclusions from the values he lived and taught, but they cannot claim his direct sanction for their chosen course of action, and may legitimately differ quite fundamentally over what programme is the most adequate way to implement his values.

What is true of Jesus' attitude to socio-economic reform seems equally true of his political attitude. His refusal to endorse the Zealot option is balanced by an attitude of detachment from, sometimes hostility toward, the Jewish establishment and, by implication, the political system to which they owed their status. He was conspicuously 'non-aligned', a fact which should be seriously pondered by those who claim his sanction for whole-hearted support of one side, whether right or left, in a political conflict. Jesus had the ideal situation in which to engage, or to urge his disciples to engage, in militant revolt or in authoritarian suppression of a discontented population, but he is as far from the one as from the other. This was not what he had come to do.

And yet he had talked about 'good news to the poor', 'release', 'liberty'. If he was not preaching political liberation, what *did* he mean? At the risk of sounding hopelessly traditional, I can only say that the liberation he proclaimed was from something far more deep-rooted than the political oppression of the Roman empire. He did not expect, and certainly did not advocate, a re-establishment of Jewish national freedom; indeed, he went out of his way to pour cold water on any such hopes.<sup>15</sup> His concern was with men's attitudes and relationships towards one another and towards God. In the latter respect he looked for liberation from sin, from hypocrisy, from alienation from God; in the former respect he attacked pride, greed, injustice, and the barriers of class, race, wealth and respectability which divide man from

<sup>14</sup> 'God and Mammon', *EQ* 51 (1979), 3-21; cf. a shorter version, 'Serving God or Mammon', *Third Way* 2/10 (1978), 3-8.

<sup>15</sup> See below pp. 18f.

man. These are all matters of attitudes and values, of a man's spiritual and social orientation, and it is here that Jesus' programme of liberation centred.

The disciple-group which grew out of Jesus' ministry was, therefore, a group of people who *were* different, rather than a group with a different philosophy or political system. They had experienced 'liberation' at the most fundamental level. It was inevitable that their community should become by its very nature a challenge to the existing structures, and we may fairly assume that Jesus expected and intended it to be so. But the Christian challenge was the positive one of demonstrating an alternative way of life, rather than the negative one of a programme to destroy and replace the existing order. It was radical but not revolutionary.

This is not to say that Jesus did not expect political change. He certainly did, as his predictions of the destruction of Jerusalem show. But it was not the change a Jewish 'liberationist' would have desired. And the kingdom of God to whose coming he taught his disciples to look forward was not to be a national triumph, but a new order which God would bring in his own time and way (Mk. 4:26–29), and which he did not suggest could be hastened by human effort, though it could and should be eagerly sought and prayed for.

Meanwhile, the kingdom of God was already available for those who were prepared to enter it, not by joining a political movement but by a personal reorientation of values resulting in a life focused on the love of God and of one's fellow-men. This was the liberation Jesus offered.

## 2. 'Liberation' Language in the New Testament

'Liberation' is not a direct equivalent of any one word in the Greek NT, but a study of a number of near-equivalents is valuable to highlight the NT perspective.

*Aphienai* and *aphesis* are used in the LXX particularly in reference to the release of captives and slaves and the remission of debts. *Aphesis* is thus a strong candidate for a 'liberationist' interpretation in the NT. It is striking, however, that of the 17 uses of *aphesis* in the NT all but two refer to the forgiveness of *sins*, and those two (both in Lk. 4:18) are in the course of a quotation from the LXX.<sup>16</sup> There is thus a remarkable change in the use of

<sup>16</sup> Note also that when the same passage is loosely quoted of the ministry of Jesus in Mt. 11:5, this clause is omitted, the emphasis falling on healing and preaching.

this term, from a socially oriented 'liberation' to a spiritual 'liberation'.<sup>17</sup>

*Eleutheroun* and its derivatives are little used in the LXX, predominantly of the freeing of slaves (though interestingly not of the Exodus, which is seen as a divine 'redemption', *lutrōsis*, rather than a human 'liberation'). In the NT they are used little outside Paul's letters, where they are used almost exclusively in a metaphorical reference to the Christian experience of freedom from the law, from moral bondage, or, in the case of the verb, from sin; such uses have no discernible socio-political application. One literal use is in the famous statement that in Christ 'there is neither slave nor free' (Gal. 3:28; cf. 1 Cor. 12:13; Col. 3:11), a statement whose eventual social implications are enormous, but these implications are not spelled out and the context does not suggest that they were in Paul's conscious intention at the time of writing. The one discussion of literal 'liberation' in the LXX sense (1 Cor. 7:20–24) is with reference to the Christian slave's personal decision whether he should seek freedom, but no programme of seeking freedom for others is mentioned. The eventual 'liberation' of the created order (Rom. 8:21) is something to be awaited with longing, but it will come apparently by the sovereign action of God. *Eleutheroun*, like *aphienai*, therefore moves from the sphere of human liberation in the LXX to a new spiritual dimension in the NT.

*Luein* has a wide variety of uses, but with reference to the release of *people* it is used in a clearly relevant way only in Rev. 1:5 of release from sins, and in Lk. 13:12, 16 of release from deformity, regarded (only here in the NT<sup>18</sup>) as a satanic bondage. The verb is used in Eph. 2:14 of the 'destruction' of the racial barrier, a theme of some importance to our subject, though not linguistically relevant to the use of *luein* for the 'freeing' of people(s); this racial harmony is the result of Christ's reconciling work, and so is reported as a *fait accompli*, rather than as a goal to be achieved.

But if *luein* is only marginally relevant to our subject, its derivative *lutrōsthai*, with the noun *lutron*, has more to offer. Basic to the usage of this group in the LXX is the idea of an equivalent payment as the means of freedom. It is used characteristically of the 'redemption' of the firstborn, and can have either people or things as its object. From its use for 'buying freedom for' slaves comes its characteristic use in Deuteronomy

<sup>17</sup> See H. Vorländer in *NIDNTT* I, 698–701.

<sup>18</sup> Mk. 7:35 has been seen in a similar light, but the context requires no more than a picturesque metaphor; the agency of Satan is not mentioned.



for God's 'redemption' of his people from slavery in Egypt. In this usage, where political liberation is of course clearly intended, the subject is always God; man may be responsible for the redeeming of an individual slave, but the redeeming of a people is only God's business, and Isaiah so uses it frequently of God's action on behalf of his people Israel. In the Psalms it develops further to be a fairly general term for rescuing the Psalmist from whatever danger threatens, but again the subject is, and must be, God.

In the NT *lutrousthai* seldom occurs, though it is interesting to see it reappearing in a nationalistic sense in the (inadequate) hope of the Emmaus disciples (Lk. 24:21; cf. *lutrōsis* for the pre-Christian hope in Lk. 1:68; 2:38). Elsewhere the root (usually with the prefix *apo-*, almost unknown in the LXX) occurs some 15 times in a clearly theological sense, related both to freedom from sin and to the ultimate salvation to which the Christian looks forward. In this usage it is characteristically connected with the death or 'blood' of Jesus, and he is normally explicitly the agent of redemption. Thus a nationalistic (though God-centred) usage which still lingers in Luke's picture of pious Jewish hopes before Christ gives way in the NT to a clearly soteriological meaning. The liberation which in the NT parallels the Exodus experience is a liberation from sin and its effects.

The most common NT verb to be considered here is *sōzein*. Its usage in both LXX and NT is of course very wide — as wide as the range of dangers and problems from which men need to be saved. In the Synoptic Gospels its most common use, beyond the literal sense of rescue from physical danger and death, is of healing from physical sickness, in which sense it is used almost as often as the more predictable *iāsthai* and *therapeuein*. Liberation from sickness is a prominent aspect of Jesus' ministry. But 'to be saved' in an absolute sense is already in the gospels beginning to take on its distinctive NT usage, where it stands parallel to 'entering the kingdom of God' (Mk. 10:23–26), and Jesus' mission is presented as one of saving the lost (Lk. 19:9–10) or more specifically 'to save his people from their sins' (Mt. 1:21). This usage becomes almost invariable in the rest of the NT, where the nature of the 'saving' is rarely explicitly stated, but is clearly from the context a restoration of a broken relationship with God. Once, in a quotation from the LXX (Rom. 9:27) the verb is used of national salvation, but in a context which is explicitly opposed to an exclusive nationalism.<sup>19</sup> *Sōzein* and its cognates are therefore

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Jude 5 for another 'OT' use, in recalling the Exodus.

in the NT concerned with men's physical and spiritual well-being, but not apparently with their social or political status.

This very sketchy study of possible 'liberation'-language in the NT therefore adds up to a remarkably unanimous concentration on men's liberation from sin and its effects (and in the case of *sōzein*, from sickness), the emphasis falling all the time on a man's relationship with God and on the initiative of God in the saving process.<sup>20</sup> Frequently this involves a marked break with LXX usage, reflecting a new emphasis among the Christian writers.

No doubt there are many other ways in which 'liberation' ideals could be expressed, and the study of specific words is in any case at best only a partial guide to the underlying thought and concerns of the writer(s); a broader approach will be attempted in the next section. But for what they are worth these word-studies provide some pointers to the essential interests of the NT which must not be ignored.

### 3. The New Testament Perspective on Liberation

'Liberation' is such an elastic word that we need to do some subdivision in order to set out what seem to be the main areas of NT concern. At the risk of some oversimplification, and of some inevitable overlap between the categories, I propose to work with three subheadings.

#### (a). *Personal liberation*

By this term I mean the setting right of 'oppression' in terms of what a person is in himself, rather than in his surroundings. Here again an immediate subdivision is necessary, between physical oppression (illness) and spiritual oppression (sin and alienation from God).

We have seen the former as an important part of the usage of *sōzein* in the NT, and it was of course one of the most prominent parts of Jesus' active ministry. The 'release' of those held by sickness was his constant concern, and continued to be that of his followers as reported in Acts, though it is remarkable that in the epistles there is little sign of this healing activity beyond the lists of gifts in 1 Cor. 12 and a brief mention in James 5:14-16.

On one occasion a physical deformity was described by Jesus as a bondage inflicted by Satan, and the healing of the deformity

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<sup>20</sup> Note, however, that *sōzein* is occasionally used with a human subject as the agent of reconciliation with God; Rom. 11:14; 1 Cor. 7:16; 9:22.

as a 'liberation' (Lk. 13:16). The fact that Luke describes the deformity as a 'spirit of infirmity' (verse 11) may suggest that this is one of those few cases where an apparently physical complaint is described in terms of demonic possession (cf. Mk. 9:17-27, epilepsy?; Mt. 9:32f. dumbness; Mt. 12:12, blindness and dumbness). Generally illness and demon-possession are carefully distinguished in the gospels, and the cure of the one described in different terms from the exorcism of the other. But whether due to a 'resident' demon or not, Lk. 13:16 suggests that Jesus regarded at least some forms of physical ill-health as a satanic oppression which demanded liberation, and in that liberation he and his earliest followers were actively engaged.

The mention of demon-possession brings us to the border-line between physical and spiritual liberation. But demon-possession is a special, and in the NT as a whole a relatively less prominent, form of spiritual bondage. In our survey of 'liberation' language we saw how the NT concentrates on personal liberation from sin and its effects, which include not only guilt and alienation from God, but also the false values of a godless world, such as legalism, greed, and all forms of selfishness and lack of love. Christian salvation (a more appropriate word than 'liberation' for the central concern of the NT, in that its modern usage is loaded towards spiritual rather than socio-political interests) is an all-round change affecting a man's total life and relationships, past, present and future, but it is focused in the restoration of a broken relationship with God, the cause to which NT thought traces our disorientation.

I hope this focus on personal liberation, especially in its spiritual aspect, is sufficiently obvious to any reader of the NT not to need extensive demonstration. We shall return to it later. The danger is that in according it its proper prominence in our approach to the NT we fall into the pietist trap of assuming that this is all the NT is interested in, as much evangelical thought has done until recent years. So having noted this as the primary concern of the earliest Christians, let us see whether their writings are interested also in other aspects of liberation.

#### *(b). Socio-economic liberation*

I have argued above that Jesus did not set out a programme for achieving the redistribution of wealth or other socio-economic reforms. This was not what he had come to achieve, and his modern followers have a hard time when they try to reconstruct such an intention from his teaching in order to claim his sanction for their own reforming programmes. But that does not mean that

he had nothing to say about social justice, nor any interest in the economic facts of life. Far from it.

Jesus takes it for granted that it is right to give money to the poor (Mk. 10:21; 14:7; Lk. 19:8; cf. Jesus' own practice as reflected in Jn. 13:29). He goes further in recommending that they be invited to meals (Lk. 14:13). A special interest in the poor is shown in his praise of the widow's offering (Mk. 12:41-44), and there is an unmistakable note of indignation in his description of the poor man suffering at the rich man's gate (Lk. 16:19-21).

But a concern for the poor is not in itself a call for socio-economic change. What then was the 'good news to the poor' which he claimed as part of his mission (Lk. 4:18; Mt. 11:5)? To call for charity is neither a new ideal nor an adequate solution to the economic problem. The Zealots and others went far beyond this in their call for social reform and the liberation of slaves;<sup>21</sup> did Jesus share these ideals?

'The poor' (*'anawim*) was an honoured title in the OT and in later Jewish literature. It described not so much those who were materially deprived, but rather the pious, oppressed by the wicked but promised ultimate vindication by God. Their literal poverty was a result of their deliberate choice of the side of God against the godless order of society. They are also called 'the meek', a class distinguished by their attitude rather than by their material status alone.<sup>22</sup> It is against this background that we must read Jesus' remarkable pronouncement to his disciples, 'Happy are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God' (Lk. 6:20). It was their deliberate choice of discipleship which had resulted in their literal poverty, and it was that chosen poverty rather than the state of destitution as such which Jesus congratulated. The word 'poor' here is not to be evaporated into a spiritual condition alone, under the influence of the very different beatitude of Mt. 5:3, but it speaks of the poverty of the disciple, who stands in continuity with the *'anawim* of the OT, not of material poverty as such.

Over against the poor disciple stands the rich man. It is hard for him to be saved (Mk. 10:23-25). The rival attraction of mammon (possessions as such, not just ill-gotten gains) militates against his relationship with God (Mt. 6:24; cf. Mk. 4:19). Greed is the great enemy of true discipleship (Lk. 12:15-21). The remedy is to give freely, even recklessly (Mk. 10:17-22; Mt. 5:40-42; Lk. 12:33f; Lk. 14:33).

Here is a radical enough call for the redistribution of wealth,

<sup>21</sup> See M. Hengel, *Victory over Violence*, 59 and note 74.

<sup>22</sup> For this strand of thought in Judaism see e.g. E. Bammel in *TDNT* VI 888-899.

but its focus is on the rich man's salvation rather than on the poor man's material needs. And this is typical of Jesus' approach. The 'good news' to the poor is not that they will become rich, or even equal, but that 'yours is the kingdom of heaven'. Poverty, in its OT sense, is a blessing not a disaster to be escaped, because it frees a man to seek the kingdom where wealth would only get in the way. Hence the reversal of rôles which is such a clear feature of Jesus' teaching about the poor (Mk. 12:41-44; Lk. 6:20-26; 16:19ff; etc.); it is not that the poor will become rich and the rich poor, but that the poor who seem in this world to be the losers will turn out in fact to be the winners, while the apparently well-off will turn out, for all their riches, to lack what really matters. Real wealth is in the kingdom of God, and in this sphere the poor man is at an advantage.

So Jesus is the liberator of the poor, as for instance James Cone so eloquently argues,<sup>23</sup> but this liberation consists not, directly at least, in the correction of economic injustice, but in opening to them a new sphere of life where the old values are transcended. It is like the 'liberation' of the tax-collectors and undesirables with whom Jesus mixed; they remained tax-collectors, but found with Jesus an acceptance and dignity which totally altered their condition.

Such an account of Jesus' message to the poor sounds dangerously like the 'opiate of the people' — a new spiritual wealth which makes material poverty more endurable, instead of doing anything about it. What prevents it from remaining at that level is the radical undercutting of the world's value-system which is involved. If treasure on earth stands in antithesis to treasure in heaven, and if true discipleship involves sitting loose to and even disposing of material possessions, if materialism is the great enemy of godliness, then no man can be a follower of Jesus and live for material advantage. And if that is so the heart has gone out of the ruthless acquisitiveness which is the root of economic injustice. Christians, if they understand their Master's teaching, cannot climb over others to get rich. When you add also Jesus' teaching on love and compassion not only have we no motive for exploitation, but we have a positive motive for seeking the material well-being of our fellow-men, and that must mean a concern for socio-economic justice. To be crudely simple, if all the world were Christian there would be no exploiters, but until that is the case love demands that the Christian be on the side of the exploited. For in Jesus' values people come before possessions,

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<sup>23</sup> *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 72-81.

and in Jesus' ministry human need, physical as well as mental and spiritual, took precedence over the conventions of the contemporary social structure.

While, then, Jesus did not campaign for economic justice, nor did he set out for his disciples a programme for doing so, he nevertheless preached and lived such values and attitudes that those who take him seriously can neither exploit nor ignore the plight of the exploited. Socio-economic liberation, if it was not his direct aim, is the proper concern of those who accept his radical value-system.

The outworking of Jesus' values in the New Testament church is most clearly seen in the concern of the Christians for each other's material needs. The famous experiment with the sharing of property in the early Jerusalem church (Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-5:11), the daily distribution to widows (Acts 6:1-6), the famine relief of Acts 11:27-30, and Paul's later collection for the relief of the Jerusalem Christians, these all demonstrate a concern for the material well-being of others, but all operate apparently within the Christian group; they are not extended to socio-economic needs in the wider community, nor are they part of any general programme of reform. If they were intended as examples for imitation by non-Christian society, this intention is not explicit.

Similarly in the teaching of some of the Epistles on the removal of social barriers (James 2:1-9) or on giving to those in need (James 2:15f; 1 Jn. 3:17), the principles are shown as operating within the Christian fellowship. It is not often that one meets a more general principle of social action such as 1 Tim 6:18f; James 1:27. Galatians 6:10 is particularly interesting in that it adds to the principle of doing good to all men, 'especially to those who are of the household of faith'.

It seems that the time had not yet come for Christians, as a minority group, to campaign for a restructuring of society at large, but within their own circles they could explore the practical implications of Jesus' radical values. In the process they no doubt made mistakes, of which the Jerusalem 'communism' is often thought to be an example. Values without specific prescriptions demand experiment, and mistakes can be made and learned from. As for society at large, their emphasis was clearly on winning people to Christ and to the new life he offered. It was thus that society could eventually be changed; for the time being they do not seem to have felt themselves in a position to try to change it.

Paul's attitude to slavery, for instance, is closely parallel to Jesus' approach to poverty. He envisages a situation where there

will continue to be masters and slaves, and gives practical guidance on the proper Christian attitude in those states (Eph. 6:5–9; Col. 3:22–4:1; cf. 1 Pet. 2:18ff); his advice to the Christian slave on seizing the chance of freedom is concerned only with the individual's choice, not with a disruption of the system (1 Cor. 7:21). But at the same time by his teaching that spiritual freedom makes men equal (1 Cor. 7:22; Gal. 3:28; Phm. 16) he undercuts the value-system of a slave-owning society and plants a time-bomb which was one day to explode in the abolition of slavery. The fact that he did not campaign for its abolition in his own time does not mean that he has nothing to say on the matter, only that what he says is in terms of attitudes, not of a programme for social reform.

Socio-economic reform, then, is an area for which the NT provides a lot of raw material, in the form of radical new values and attitudes, which began to find expression within the caring community of the faith. In relation to society at large, however, beyond the powerful example of a new way of life among the followers of Jesus, these values had scarcely begun to be worked out in practice, so that the search for any specific programme for Christian social action in the NT is not a hopeful one.

### (c). *Political liberation*

The liberation of the nation Israel from political oppression was the grand objective of the Zealots and of several other groups of resistance fighters and activists of the NT period. In as far as we can find in the NT a parallel to the national liberation movements of today,<sup>24</sup> it will be in these Jewish liberation movements. The next chapter will show how far Jesus distanced himself from their revolutionary methods. But did he share their ideals? Did he and his early followers offer any support, however passive, to the cause of political liberation?

Jesus came as the fulfilment of the hopes of those who were 'looking for the consolation of Israel' (Lk. 2:25; cf. Lk. 1:54f, 68f; 2:38) and it is most unlikely that their hopes were purely spiritual. He was tried and convicted as a nationalist agitator, 'the king of the Jews', and after his death at least some of his followers looked back on a now shattered hope that he was to 'redeem

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<sup>24</sup> See N. A. Dahl, 'Nations in the New Testament' in *New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World. Essays in honour of Harry Sawyerr*, ed. M. E. Glasswell and E. W. Fasholé-Luke (London: SPCK, 1974), 54–68, for the inappropriateness of the term 'nation' for the various ethnic groups of the Roman Empire in NT times, as well as for the paucity of NT interest in 'nationalism'.

Israel' (Lk. 24:21). Even after his resurrection his disciples still saw his mission in such terms (Acts 1:6). Such a view of his mission clearly accounts for much of the popular enthusiasm during his ministry (see especially Jn. 6:14f; Mk. 11:9f and parr.) and the subsequent disenchantment. Had Jesus wished to promote national liberation, he had a ready-made base from which to do it.

His rejection of a political rôle has been mentioned earlier. We have seen that the focus of his messianic mission was in a different area, summed up in the conversation with Pilate on the nature of his kingship (Jn. 18:33–38).

As for the hopes of Jewish nationalism, Jesus not only bypassed them, but went out of his way to repudiate them, warning his contemporaries of the divine judgement which was to fall on 'this generation' (Lk. 11:49–51; 13:34–5; 19:41–44; 23:28–31, etc.), and of the complete devastation of the temple which was the focus of their national life (Mk. 13:1ff, etc.). The one act of Jesus which seems to give credence to a revolutionary purpose (the Cleansing of the Temple) was directed not against the Romans but against the Jewish establishment. There is a good deal to suggest that he believed that the Jewish people as then constituted had forfeited their status as God's special people (Mk. 12:1–9; Mt. 21:43; 22:1–14; etc.); certainly he saw God's purpose as now embracing others, to the possible exclusion of Jews (Mt. 8:11–12). Even in the very context of his famous 'liberation'-manifesto at Nazareth (Lk. 4:16–21) Jesus went on to point out that God's concern could not be confined to nationalistic limits (4:24–27), a sentiment which did not please his compatriots (4:28f). His vision of the future of the nation as such is entirely of judgement, and his teaching gives no hint of a subsequent political restoration for Israel as a nation.<sup>25</sup>

In the specific context of first-century Palestine, therefore, Jesus not only avoided involvement in the movement for political liberation, but deliberately poured cold water on any such ideals. Neither his teaching nor his action gives any backing to an attempt to overturn the *status quo*. Indeed on one occasion he gratuitously introduced as an example of Christian non-resistance the recommendation that the unjust 'dragooning' methods of the occupying forces should be complied with even beyond what was

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<sup>25</sup> On all this paragraph see the detailed argument of my article 'Old Testament Prophecy and the Future of Israel' in *Tyndale Bulletin* 26 (1975), 53–78. On alleged exceptions to the last observation in Lk. 21:24 and Mt. 23:39 see *ibid.*, 74–76, with note 41.



inevitable (Mt. 5:41); the 'second mile' is powerful incidental proof of Jesus' acceptance of the political *status quo*.

In the rest of the NT the question of the Christian's attitude to the government (in all instances the 'imperialist' government of Rome, as exercised through its local representatives) arises from time to time. 1 Timothy 2:1-2 requires Christians to pray for those in political authority, with the understanding that through their efforts God will ensure 'a quiet and peaceable life'. 1 Peter has much to say on the Christian's conduct in the face of hostile authorities, and includes the specific injunction to be subject to political authorities (specifying both the emperor and his local representatives) 'for the Lord's sake', attributing the local governor's authority to God who 'sent' him (2:13-17). Most strongly of all Romans 13:1-7 spells out the authority of the secular ruler as part of God's ordering of the world, and draws the conclusion that the Christian must 'be subject', not resist, and pay not only his taxes, but also respect and honour.

A full discussion of Romans 13:1-7 is impossible here, but it must be insisted that if this passage is seen as an integral part of the discussion of the outworking of discipleship beginning in 12:1, it must be read as enshrining a general principle, theologically grounded, rather than as a pragmatic recommendation applicable only to the early days of Nero.<sup>26</sup> Civil government as such is a God-given institution; it is his way of running the world, and as such requires the Christian's submission. (This is the word Paul uses, rather than obedience.)<sup>27</sup>

Must the Christian then accept any government, however bad? Can political liberation never be right? In a useful exposition of Romans 13:1-7,<sup>28</sup> N. T. Wright suggests that when a government makes itself a god, it ceases to be 'government under God', and is therefore theologically on a par with anarchy; it then no longer falls under the principles expressed in Romans 13. The portrait of anti-God government in Revelation 13, which is often set in contrast with Romans 13, would be such an 'anarchy'.

This suggestion is worth exploring, but the apparently universal

<sup>26</sup> For the latter view see e.g. B. N. Kaye in *Law, Morality and the Bible*, ed. B. N. Kaye and G. J. Wenham (Leicester: IVP, 1978) 104-108; cf. *idem* *TSF Bulletin* 63 (1972) 10-12; also, apparently, M. Hengel, *Victory over Violence* 88f. The implication that Paul would not have written this ten years later depends both on the assumption that no permanent principle is expressed and on the questionable belief that the early years of Nero's principate were years of 'good' government.

<sup>27</sup> On the importance of this distinction see C. E. B. Cranfield, *NTS* 6 (1959/60), 242-245, and his commentary (*ICC*) *ad loc.*

<sup>28</sup> *Third Way*, vol. 2, nos. 9-12 (May-June 1978).

Christian conviction that at least *some* governments must be opposed (however much we may differ over which ones they are!) is surely better explained as a case of the 'lesser evil', where there is a conflict of principles, each in itself good and divinely sanctioned. To resist government is bad in itself, but the alternative may be worse. The famous decision of the apostles that 'we must obey God rather than men' (Acts 5:29) points in this direction. So while political disruption can certainly not be justified from Romans 13, and is in fact always a violation of the principle there set out, it may nonetheless sometimes be the Christian's duty despite that principle in a case where a greater principle of Scripture is at issue. The same 'conscience' which requires our submission to government (Rom. 13:5) may also cause us to defy a particular government's edicts to the point of advocating its overthrow.<sup>29</sup> Such decisions are always painful, and are seldom so clear as to command general Christian agreement. But the ethics of Christian discipleship in a fallen world will never be simple.

But in any case Romans 13 is not about changing governments and liberating nations, but about how a Christian should conduct himself in the *status quo*, and it is hazardous to look in this passage for teaching on liberation, for or against. That is not Paul's concern here. Indeed it is not his concern in any of his letters, and the same may be said of the other NT letter-writers. Paul was concerned rather with the practicalities of living within the existing order, and in that context he exemplified well the principle of Romans 13, respecting the legitimate authority of the High Priest in Israel (Acts 23:5), and of the authorities of Philippi, even though he took it upon himself to remind them of how their authority should properly be exercised (Acts 16:19–39), and expecting the Roman government to protect his legitimate rights as a citizen (Acts 22:25–29; 23:16ff; 25:10f; etc.).

But political liberation is a subject which simply did not come up. The NT writers, while they see the Christian as primarily a citizen of another type of kingdom (Phil. 3:20; Heb. 11:13–16; etc.), expect him to function as a responsible citizen of the earthly society in which he finds himself. They do not lay down how he should react to a government which makes this impossible for his Christian conscience, nor, apparently, do they expect this situation to occur.

The NT, then, gives no direct approval to political liberation.

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<sup>29</sup> On the rôle on 'conscience' in this connection, see D. J. Bosch, 'The Church and the Liberation of Peoples?', *Missionalia* 5/2 (1977), 25–26.

We may, however, argue for Christian involvement in liberation movements as a necessary means to a good end, particularly as the means of achieving socio-economic justice for the subjects of an oppressive government. This, as we have seen, can be justified from NT thinking, even if it is far from being the main concern of the NT writers. Here we are in the grey area where principles must be weighed against one another, and good ends weighed against undesirable means. The NT gives us no firmer grounds. Not only does it refuse us direct sanction for political liberation in itself as a Christian ideal, but it makes it very clear that political insubordination is, for the Christian, wrong in itself. It is only as the lesser evil that it can be justified.

And let us not delude ourselves that this stance of the NT writers was due to the excellence of the political situation in which they lived. There was ample fuel for liberationist agitation in their situation. It was far harder for them to accept the *status quo* than it is for us in the modern West. But that is what they did, because their interest lay essentially elsewhere.

Dr. David Bosch, writing in the context of modern South Africa, provocatively sums up the focus of the NT writers in a sharp distinction between the liberation of *people*, which he sees as central to their concern, and the liberation of *peoples*, a concept which (like 'nation') he finds not only irrelevant to the NT, but actually in opposition to the supra-national character of Christianity, so that "the people" is not something that has to be liberated, but something *from which* people have to be liberated.<sup>30</sup>

#### 4. Conclusions

The liberation which the NT offers is primarily liberation from sin and its consequences,<sup>31</sup> or, as we would more customarily put it, spiritual salvation. But among the consequences of sin is a twisted system of values, the self-centred materialism of unredeemed humanity, and liberation from these false values is an essential part of Christian salvation. This liberation makes distinctions of race, colour, class, sex, and wealth irrelevant to the Christian. Such liberation, rather than a direct attack on the structure of society, is the goal of Jesus and of the NT writers. Political liberation as such is not their concern.

Should Christians then ignore the cry of the oppressed for justice, and offer them only new values to make the injustice more

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 29–35.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. H. Gollwitzer's stress on liberation from *judgement* as the heart of the gospel, *art. cit.*, 407–409.

palatable? Should they write off liberation theology as incurably worldly and at odds with the perspective of the NT?

Liberation theology calls our attention to areas where in practice the values of NT Christianity are flouted, where unredeemed humanity (and, too often, humanity which claims redemption but does not exhibit its fruits) has its way. Such situations are an affront to the values Jesus preached, and therefore a standing challenge to those who claim to follow him. The NT indicates plainly enough, and the Christian conscience shouts aloud, that these things ought not to be so.

But the NT does not tell us how to right these wrongs. It tells us the ends, but leaves the means for us to work out. It provides us with principles to guide us, but these principles can point in opposite directions, as when love demands a change in the system while the divine institution of government demands submission to the authorities. It is a very cavalier or a very simple Christian who can claim that his course is clearly laid down in Scripture.

But this is what liberation theology appears to do, when it elevates one approach to a quasi-canonical status. The ends it seeks, of social justice and freedom from oppression, are Christian ends, provided they are not allowed to usurp the saving mission of Christ as the essence of the Christian gospel. But the too frequent assumption that the political means favoured somehow also carries a divine stamp of approval is dangerous, especially when those means are so clearly at odds with Jesus' rejection of the revolutionary option.

Indeed it has been suggested that from the NT point of view the trouble with liberation theology is that it is not radical enough!<sup>32</sup> It concentrates on the symptoms (social injustice etc.) without prescribing a cure for the illness itself (the twisted values of selfish materialism). Jesus was radical without being revolutionary, but liberation theology is revolutionary without being radical.

That is, perhaps, an unfairly simplistic quip, but it may point to an underlying problem with much liberation theology. It has sometimes been noted how the biblical exegesis of many writers of this school is focused on the OT. It looks at the Exodus as the great paradigm of God's liberating work, seen in political terms.<sup>33</sup> But even in the OT itself, and overwhelmingly in the NT, the Exodus is interpreted as a pointer to God's redemption of his people from a more fundamental bondage, that of sin and

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<sup>32</sup> D. J. Bosch, *art. cit.* 37.

<sup>33</sup> See M. Hengel, *Victory over Violence*, 59, for a similar use of the Exodus theme by the Zealots.

alienation from God.<sup>34</sup> By concentrating on this OT aspect of God's saving work, has liberation theology forgotten the radical newness of the Christian gospel, which goes to the heart of those false values from which man's oppression and injustice stem? In its proper concern to eliminate the fruits of sin, has it prescribed a remedy which leaves the root intact?

For oppressing, exploiting, affluent man is in need of liberation too, at the deepest level. Clark Pinnock concludes a volume on *Evangelicals and Liberation*<sup>35</sup> with a brief, trenchant chapter entitled 'A Call for the Liberation of North American Christians'. He pleads for their 'liberation from bondage to Mammon'. It is a salutary warning; and it suggests the sobering thought that if *this* liberation had been achieved, as surely the NT demands, many of the crying needs which have called forth liberation theology might not have existed.

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<sup>34</sup> See R. E. Nixon, *The Exodus in the NT* (London: Tyndale Press, 1963); cf. D. F. Wells, *The Search for Salvation* (Leicester: IVP, 1978), 134–136.

<sup>35</sup> Ed. Carl E. Armerding (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977).