CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL-ECONOMIC TENSIONS

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INTRODUCTION

I am a pastor of a Presbyterian church in Brazil and also a professor of urban theology in the Divinity School at Philadelphia University-UniFil. It should be clear that I do not come to this important subject as a scholar-economist, but as one who has labored within the context of the church with a commitment to the historic Christian faith. Added to this place of service and commitment, I come with a special interest in urban ministry, especially the planting of new churches in the large cities of Brazil.

In spite of the lively debates and scholarly works, the subject of a Christian identity within the context of the socio-economic tensions of our time remains a major challenge. This is true of those who approach it from a scholarly vantage point, as well as by those who would even consider it irrelevant to the task of carrying on the traditional mission of the church. Almost no one comes to this subject without some opinion. However, we know that the church as an institution should not view itself as having any privileged competence over the economic sciences or economic practices. Nevertheless, since we believe that Christian truth must penetrate all of life, it should be expected that God’s people need to know how to live Christianly as they relate truth and experience to the world of work and economics and, above all, how to obey the second great command, to “love your neighbor as yourself.”1 Therefore, it is useful to keep before us the foundational truth of the Christian faith regarding God, man, the human society, Christian social responsibility, and the dialogue between faith and the

1 Lk 10:27.
political and socio-economic ideological systems. The church’s constant challenge is to re-evaluate these ideas and theories in the light of Holy Scripture.

The Latin-American Context

Latin America is a rich and fascinating continent. It is rich in its cultural and historical diversity, in its natural and mineral resources, and in its widely divergent religions and world views. Yet, in the life of Latin-American people, there is tension and unrest due to the instability caused by constant changes in the political sphere and by economic unbalance. There are poor people who do not have a place to sleep, and, in contrast, there are wealthy people who cannot sleep because of economic worries. Meanwhile, the middle class is immersed in debt, and suffers the worst part of the whole bargain. Latin America is a continent of extreme contradictions, where one finds wealth and well-being next to misery and exploitation. In the 20th century, urbanization revealed the extreme poverty of favelas (shanty towns) next to the luxurious neighborhoods of the rich. The process of globalization associated with neo-liberal principles began to characterize this new phase of capitalism at the end of the 20th century. We can date its beginnings, more or less, at the time of the election of Carlos Salinas as president in Mexico (1988), followed by the election of Carlos Menen in Argentina (1989), Carlos Andres Perez in Venezuela (1989), Alberto Fujimori in Peru (1990), and Fernando Collor de Melo (1990) followed by Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1994) in Brazil.

One should take a look, as an example, to the question of the external debt of Latin-American countries, which is approximately 792 billion dollars, and the difficult situation created by the payment of interest upon that debt, as well as the tough economic programs imposed by international organizations. In 1999, there were five countries in Latin America whose interest payments of their external debt were superior to 30 % of the total value of their exportation: Argentina with 75.93 %, Bolivia with 32.05 %, Brazil with 110.94 %, Colombia with 42.86 %, and Peru with 32.65 %.

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