CHAPTER 13

When Liberation Becomes Survival\(^1\)

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**Introduction**

Within the evangelical and, more specifically, the Pentecostal community, efforts for liberation are viewed often with suspicion. In these instances, conservative evangelicals perceive liberative movements as attempts by radical individuals or fringe elements to infuse the authentic Christian context with secular, even ungodly agendas that potentially can move the faith community away from its central mission of redeeming souls and reconciling them to a saving relationship with Christ. Proponents of both feminist and ethnic, or cultural, liberation are suspected of being interested in mounting narrowly defined campaigns to gain power for themselves and their constituencies at the expense of upsetting the God-ordained order for the church and broader society. For example, missionary scholar Raymond Hundley, in his 1987 work, *Radical Liberation Theology: An Evangelical Response*, examined Latin American liberation theology and found little in it that was laudatory, casting the entire project as “theological and doctrinal revolution that stands in opposition to the very foundations of traditional Christian doctrine,” and as “a whole new way of looking at Christian faith that challenges all past ways of being Christian.”\(^2\)

Within this way of thinking, discussions of disenfranchised or marginalized communities’ struggles to obtain essential human rights and dignity, considered the natural privilege of others, are perceived as antithetical to an authentic biblical spirituality. For such spirituality is conceived as dispensing with attempts to gain one’s rights for the sake of maintaining unity in the body of Christ. Those who think this way understand social disparity simply as the unfortunate, yet irreparable, consequence of the Fall. As such, it is either to

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be patiently borne as one's particular cross, or is characterized as a situation from which providential deliverance will eventually arrive, without disruptive human intervention and within God's predestined but largely indeterminable period.

An objection raised by one of my students in a contemporary theology seminar at an evangelical seminary presents an excellent example of this way of thinking; it occurred when a student interrupted the discussion to raise an earnest question: “What does this conversation have to do with the saving of souls?” he challenged. Moreover, he quickly added that if it had nothing to do with the evangelistic endeavor, there was no sense in carrying the discussion further.

The question at first disarmed me, and I scrambled to counter the objection with an appropriate spontaneous response. Yet, that question haunted me through the evening, disturbing me to the point that I prepared a lecture to address it during the next class session. I was agitated, not only because I did not have an immediately adequate answer for the student, but also because the question represented, for me, the tenor of what the movement to which I have given the larger part of my life had become. It signaled what I have come to see as a major shortcoming in much of the evangelical theological enterprise: a dichotomy between what is considered the biblical mandate for winning and making disciples of those who do not know Christ, preparing them for a glorious afterlife, and inattention to the reality that circumscribes the lived situations of many believers—and nonbelievers—who are the victims of or challenged by the presence of systemic evil, social injustice, and deep disparity in access to what is necessary for a decent quality of life in this present world.

A roundtable discussion I attended some years ago on the campus of my former institution provides a different angle. A highly respected local pastor of a trans-ethnic congregation attempted to bring balance to the political divide that often exists between members of different cultures within the evangelical community. He labored to explain the need to put kingdom principles above socio-political differences and to refrain from using invective to characterize those with whom we disagree politically. Rather, he contended that we should graciously engage brothers and sisters in Christ with whom we differ. Yet, even this attempt at providing a center for reasoned discourse fell short when he offhandedly referred to Christians who are passionately concerned about justice as being ‘on the left.’ In doing so, he immediately discredited his early statements about objectivity.

As an African American woman, I have often been on the receiving end of racial or gender injustice both within the church and Christian academy as well as in the broader society. Indeed, the most debilitating experiences of