TOWARD A MILITANT BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

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Jeffrey S. Siker has provided the readers of *Biblical Interpretation* with a fine overview of the use of the Bible in the theological writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez. This is a notable service to theologians. But it is also a notable service to biblical teachers and scholars. And it is as a biblical scholar that I should like to clarify the challenge that Gutiérrez and liberation theology present to the practitioners of our discipline, the challenge to take up a militant biblical scholarship.

A Pastoral Reading of the Bible

The Bible is, according to Gutiérrez, the word of God addressed, first, to the people of God who are, preferentially, the poor, and then to communities of believers who practice solidarity with the poor.

This is (1) a believing reading of the Bible. The Bible is the Word of God. Biblical interpretation, which may well include historical and sociological criticism, is properly a discipline which occurs at the service of a believing community. And the biblical scholar, like the theologian, does her interpretation as a second step after the practice of her faith.

(2) This is a reading of the Bible as the Word of God addressed to a particular audience, the poor who believe that God affirms them and rejects their poverty. The Word of God has a preferred addressee. Biblical scholars, a privileged club of persons who have had a very expensive education and require the support of expensive libraries, are not the ones to whom God’s Word is addressed in the first instance. To listen in on God’s Word for the poor, a biblical scholar must be in touch with the poor who listen to the Word God addresses to them.

(3) This is a militant reading, that is, a reading seeking guidance for a life of discipleship understood, as in Matthew’s Gospel, as the practice of radical justice. Militancy at the service of the elimination of poverty begins by an analysis of the causes that bring about the existence of that poverty and continues in the involvement in the po-
itical struggle to uproot those causes. This is a first step of discipleship, and is a condition for a successful execution of the second step, biblical scholarship itself.

Bartolomé de las Casas, Gutiérrez’s personal saint and the forefather of liberation theology, understood that the Indian was the poor person of the Gospel whom we are obliged to love as we love ourselves (Matt. 22:34–40) and to serve as we would serve our Lord (Matt. 25:31–46). In this way of looking at the Christian life, theology and biblical scholarship become an expression of the love for the poor neighbor who stands before us in the persons and nations of the Native American, the enslaved African, or the impoverished masses of the Third World.

Gustavo Gutiérrez takes the neighbor, the Bible and the Church most seriously. Each—neighbor, Bible and Church—has to be read critically, that is, searching for the root beneath the surface appearances. But the critical principle is simple. It consists in the affirmation of the life of the poor which entails, before anything else, the rejection of their poverty. Authentic biblical scholarship, like authentic Christian theology, must be the task of a believer who has assumed the challenge of God through God’s Word to serve the least of these, Jesus’ brothers and sisters.

It is all embarrassingly simple. Cultured persons like the readers of Biblical Interpretation would have no reason to pay any attention if it were not backed by the power of witnesses who have risked their lives to live it. Scholars must take note when persons of the unquestionable scholarship of Bartolomé and Gustavo are willing to put their reputations and their lives on the line for the poor of Jesus Christ. Genuine biblical scholarship, like genuine theology, has a martyrial quality, the disposition to lay down one’s life for one’s smallest brothers and sisters. And there is an unquestionable authority that derives from the seriousness of such theology or scholarship.

Militant Biblical Scholarship

Just as Bartolomé was backed by a group of Dominican missionaries, who had laid their lives on the line for the Indians and some of whom preceded him in this struggle, so Gustavo is surrounded by a cloud of men and women who live, practice ministry, and do research in the service of the poor. They call for a militant Bible reading, and also for a militant biblical scholarship.