Liberation: A Dual-Edged Sword

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The Scope of the Liberation Challenge

Liberation is one of those perennial concerns that creates a great deal of pain when debated in public, partly because we have bad memories and associations with certain individuals or groups with vested interests. The landscape is amply strewn with the tattered banners of revolutionaries who have tried to correlate properly the relation of their particular cause to some ideological claim, in hopes of rendering it legitimate, and often this is done in the name of God.

The remarks in this article represent less conclusions reached, than difficulties and complexities encountered in discussing such a concern as liberation. The problem of the subject of liberation is further heightened by the fact that there are so many definitions and kinds of liberation. Hence, this treatment is more like that of a collage than of a mosaic; yet it somehow "hangs together" even though all the pieces do not always fit. It may well be, then, that it is precisely the inner dissonance and tensions rooted in the quest for liberation as a whole, which allows it to speak more authoritatively to us. Hegel's dictum that "the real is rational" is not in good repute in a day when the real, the authentic, is assumed to be fragmentary and at some levels incoherent.

The major focus of this presentation is to examine the claim that liberation, in essence, is the product of an interaction between the Divine and human in history. By no means should this be construed as implying that this is the sole focus of the problem; it is, however, a major one. While many definitions and approaches to liberation abound, liberation need not be bound to ideology alone. This paper understands ideology as the human attempt to unmask structural demons of oppression on the one hand while on the other hand it is the Holy Spirit as God that provides the spiritual motivating dynamic ultimately to throw off the yokes of oppression.

While I do not presume to speak for Pentecostal-Charismatic believers, the view of liberation espoused here has developed from a religious perspective forged out of my pentecostal roots. This view points to Scripture as a guide for all programs and agendas including that of liberation, with the understanding that in order to achieve maximum effectiveness our programs and agendas must evolve from the nexus of basic religious experience, under the guidance of the revolutionary transforming presence of God the Holy Spirit.

Implicit in these preliminary remarks is the view that liberation is not rightly understood when it is regarded solely as the antonym for
ideology, in which case one would choose between them. But liberation need not constrict ideology. Actually, liberation can confer and express ideology as readily as it can cancel it. The real antithesis of authority is absence of accountability for one’s freedom. Since racism, sexism and capitalism are the most dominant strongholds of oppression in our time, we need to review an aspect of our history that is still too much with us.

1. The Problem of God as Holy Spirit in a Niggerized World

The Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky’s work, The Brothers Karamazov, profoundly observed that the real ruler of humankind is he who holds their conscience and their bread in his hands. The discordant features of contemporary American life all too often announce the brokenness of our world, and provide us with a proleptic clue to our fallen world. Throughout this analysis I will consistently make a distinction between “Christianity” as it has been expressed and espoused historically by oppressors and their institutions, and Christianity proper, embraced by adherents of the Christian faith under the Lordship of Christ. Frederick Douglas was quite discerning in making a vital distinction between the two. After his reference to Christianity as the slave-holding religion of the land, he went on to say in a rather indicting way:

I love the pure perceivable and impartial Christianity of Christ; I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypo-critical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason but the most deceitful one for calling the religion of this land Christianity. I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels.1

The long, agonizing, dehumanizing process of slavery began with European Colonial expansion and was initiated during the advent of the Atlantic slave trade, circa 1440. For the next three and a half centuries, the Western World participated in the rape of a highly civilized people as several million slaves were transported from the shores of West Africa to positions in forced servitude elsewhere. Combined with the traumatic and debilitating effects of being uprooted from their homeland, came the midnight of despair and death for a people branded like cattle and herded like captured wild animals for their journey through the Middle Passage to the Americas. The long midnight was marked by fatal disease, severe lashings, frequent rape and a “seasoning period” where slaves were taught obedience under the absolute dominion of the slave master.

During this difficult period of change and transition, black slaves relied upon their ancestral religions for support as they became