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The Reformation and Liberation Theology: Insights for the Challenges of Today

Richard Shaull

Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991

U.S. \$11.95

The work of Richard Shaull is especially vital in western middle-class culture today. Whether in Canada, the United States, Japan or western Europe, ruling economic and political elites are joining in a global effort to maximize profits at the expense of justice issues. In our own society they are utilizing massive manipulative advertising to encourage the affluent and relatively affluent to fulfil their needs by buying consumer products be they material or emotional. Meanwhile, social welfare legislation and labour unions are being undermined in the name of "global competition". What does the Christian church have to say to all this? Can it offer any message beyond a more religious version of "cocooning" which is so appealing to the middle-class sectors of our culture? Richard Shaull, in his published books, holds that the church can and must offer an alternative answer to these forces in our culture. For him, being true to the Gospel means offering and living a response which draws from the experience of Latin American liberation theology.

However, in *The Reformation and Liberation Theology* he adds another dimension to his vision. This time he appeals directly to those churches, including his own, which embody the heritage of the Protestant Reformation. He is convinced that what sixteenth-century Protestant movements experienced is captured today by the radical Christian base communities of Latin America and elsewhere. The book has its weaknesses. Sometimes it falls into the trap of broad generalizations without providing the requisite nuancing, and at other times, the reader could use more information.

However, such imperfections are hardly devastating to the overwhelmingly solid character of the book. First of all, it is exceedingly well written. It is terse, clear and inspiring. Its design ensures the possibility of wide usage—from church study groups to seminary classrooms. Also, he recaptures the spirit and history of Protestantism in two ways: (1) he summarizes very effectively the enduring and major motifs of historic Protestant revolt; (2) he recaptures for sacred memory and usage the fundamentally revolutionary character of Protestantism both in its principles and in its different manifestations. This second contribution is habitually ignored by a Protestant tradition grown comfortable with the status quo. As well, the author is profoundly ecumenical. On the one hand, he does not use the Reformation against Catholicism, nor does he use it to prop up any moribund Protestant traditions. On the other hand, he does not dismiss the Anabaptist heritage, a practice so common in mainline Protestantism. Instead, he lauds that revolutionary tradition and calls on Protestant communions of all kinds to resurrect the heritage of the Radical Reformation.

In fact, the last two chapters of the book dealing with the Anabaptists may be the best section of the book. Above all, Shaull's book is a work of partisan advocacy. He is not calling upon Protestants to celebrate their heritage in quiet and safety. He is calling for a new Reformation involving discipleship under the cross for the sake of the oppressed and marginalized. All Christians, Protestant or otherwise, need to hear his prophetic challenge. His own words bear rich testimony to that biblical commission:

Committed Christians are citizens of another world. The state is the realm of power and domination; the church, a community of love and service. The function of the church in society is not to legitimate these structures of power but to be a prophetic voice, exposing their injustice and corruption. The church is not oriented toward the high and mighty and the conquest of prestige and power but toward the poor and marginal people of the world and an effort to raise them up. Never completely at home in this world, it lives "in the wilderness," a pilgrim people witnessing to the future reign of God (113).

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Messianic Ethics. Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God and the Church in Response

Ben Wiebe

Waterloo, Ontario and Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1992
223 pp.

Ben Wiebe, a pastor and university lecturer, has set himself the task of examining the central significance of the kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus. Did Jesus wish to underline the decisive activity of God, or the human ethical response? Did he address his ethics primarily to the individual or was he concerned about the wider issues of justice and community? These are the major questions to be explored.

The author places his discussion in historical perspective by illustrating in chapter one how scholars in the past have differed in their assessment of the ethics of Jesus. From Ritschl to Bultmann, the Kingdom of God has been interpreted as a realm introduced solely at the initiative of God, as a society realized in Christian ethical action in the present, or even as an experience in the human heart. The ethics associated with the Kingdom, accordingly, has been regarded as an integral part of life in the kingdom, or as intended only for an interim period preceding the soon to be expected arrival of the kingdom. It has been characterized as an individual ethics by some, and as a community ethics by others.