



## **The Viability of Luther Today** ***A Perspective from Latin America***

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I propose to approach this theme from the viewpoint of the reality of Latin America and of the theology which has been developing in this continent for some years. First, I shall offer an example of this contextual theology. Second, I shall try to sum up and interpret the central concern of Luther. Third, I shall confront this concern with Latin American theology, attempting to point out the significance of Luther's central theme vis-à-vis the Latin American situation. And finally, I shall address directly the matter of the viability of Luther for Latin America today.

### I. CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY: AN EXAMPLE

Latin Americans are conscious of the fact that they live in a situation of dependence and domination by the center of economic and political power. The underdevelopment and poverty in which the great majority of people live in the Latin American countries is the product of this dependence and domination. Liberation means "in the first place a concrete socio-historical process by which the poor, who have been conscientized, organized and mobilized, seek their liberation by means of the transformation of the kind of society under which they suffer."<sup>1</sup> Many Christians, especially Roman Catholics, have joined in solidarity with the attempts at liberation which have been made in the different countries within the last twenty years. They have done this conscious of the fact that the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America has been an accomplice of the historical process of domination. From the standpoint of their participation in liberating movements and processes, Christians have begun to reinterpret or reread the Christian faith and the gospel from the viewpoint of the poor. This rereading takes off from the structural-dialectical analysis of Latin American society. In light of this analysis and of the consequent liberating practice, these

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<sup>1</sup>Leonardo Boff, "Lutero entre la reforma y la liberación" (Luther between Reformation and Liberation), *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología* 1/1 (April 1984) 83. Translation mine.

Christians have attempted to reinterpret the great biblical and theological themes, beginning with the Exodus. Not much time elapsed before christology was interpreted in a liberating key.

Perhaps the most serious and notable christological sketch that has appeared until now is *Christology at the Crossroads* by the Jesuit Jon Sobrino, professor in the Central American University in San Salvador. The background against which Sobrino writes is a Christianity that is content with an intellectual and verbal orthodoxy, which is practiced almost exclusively in

formal worship, and which to all intents and purposes has no real life apart from orthodoxy and formal worship. Forcefully combating this religiosity that is centered in orthodoxy and formal worship, Sobrino works out a christology that takes its cue from following the historical Jesus. To say that Jesus is the way to God means that only those who take part in the concrete practice of Jesus will come to know God. I would like to illustrate this praxeological christology through some quotations that are characteristic of the book, and which I hope have not been torn from their context:

In short, we are seeking to avoid any sort of Christology that starts right off by saying that access to God and his Christ is possible through mere orthodoxy, cultic worship, or some sort of cultic relationship rather than through the concrete following of the historical Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

Faith in Jesus means accepting the fact that in him there has been revealed the Son—which is to say, the way to God. That can be done in orthodox confessions and in cultic acclamations. But faith in Jesus attains its maximum radicality when we accept his path as normative and traverse it. The most radical and most orthodox affirmation of *faith in Jesus* is affirming that the *faith of Jesus* is the correct way to draw nearer to God and realize his kingdom, and then acting accordingly.<sup>3</sup>

If we take due note of Jesus' demand to bring about the kingdom, and even more of his own personal example, then we are forced to conclude that personal conversion must always be associated with social praxis. Speaking in terms of justice, we are forced to conclude that Jesus sees people becoming just only insofar as they do the work of justice. In systematic terms people become "children" of God by doing the work of "brotherhood."...So now we see that the fundamental moral value for the follower of Jesus is bringing about the kingdom of God, which means doing the work of re-creative justice and achieving brotherhood. It is through this effort that the follower of Jesus simultaneously becomes a just person and a child of God.<sup>4</sup>

Christian faith also rejects the idea that there is any direct access to God in cultic worship. It can come only indirectly through service to human beings, specifically to those who can represent and embody the total otherness of God in historical terms, namely, the poor and the oppressed....The fulfillment of Christian obligations embodies the only way to gain access to God. It verifies the fact that we are participating in God's life and hence makes the

<sup>2</sup>Jon Sobrino, S. J., *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1978) 61.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 108.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 121 and 123.

reality of God "truly real." Rather than securing ourselves against God, we turn

the history of the world into God's own history.<sup>5</sup>

There is no privileged cultic or philosophical access to God. We gain access to God by trying to fashion history, and we experience that process as both a grace and a concrete line of praxis. Whereas religion claims that we can make contact with the deity through some direct act of intention, faith maintains that we make contact with God by journeying toward him and trying to fashion his kingdom. In Christ's resurrection we find the definitive promise of the goal toward which we are striving; but it is in the figure of the historical Jesus that we discover how to journey toward that goal. Going to God means making God real in history; it means building up God's kingdom [here and now]. No abstract concept of the deity can teach us that fact, however; we must learn it from [the concrete figure of the historical] Jesus.<sup>6</sup>

What happens in divine revelation? We do not get some abstract knowledge about God or some doctrine; we get a manifestation of God in action. What we get in revelation is the historical and historicized love of God. Viewed theologically, the life of the Christian does not consist in knowing about that love but in receiving it and sharing it. Knowledge of it is subordinate to that process, though it is not to be disdained. To put it another way, it would be a complete contradiction to proclaim God's message solely so that it might be pondered and talked about; for that which is communicated is to be received as a liberating love. Thus the New Testament proposes (1) the supremacy of praxis over mere thinking and (2) the need for praxis if orthodoxy is to become concretely Christian rather than remain abstract.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the rejection of cultic worship and bare orthodoxy as means of access to God and Christ, the following fundamental assertions can be discerned in these quotations: (1) the faith of Jesus was his fashioning of the kingdom and thus his drawing near to God; (2) the most radical expression of faith in Jesus is to adhere to the faith of Jesus, which is to say, to fashion the kingdom of God and thus draw near to him; (3) to fashion the kingdom of God is to do the work of re-creative justice and to achieve brotherhood, above all as an act of service to the poor and oppressed; (4) to fashion the kingdom of God in this sense is to make God real in history, which is equivalent to "fashioning history"; (5) by doing such justice the human being becomes just and a child of God; and (6) all of this praxeological reality of faith in Jesus is experienced at the same time as a grace and as a concrete line of praxis.

## II. LUTHER'S CENTRAL CONCERN

The antitheses against which Luther struggled when he made his great evangelical discovery were, at least superficially, at the opposite pole of the antitheses against which Latin American theology in general and the christology of Sobrino in particular are struggling. Late medieval popular piety brought forth

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 277.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 307. The words in parentheses have been added by the translator to the Spanish version and are not included in parentheses in the published English version.

at the height of its activism an enormous amount of “good works” or pious practices which were aimed at pleasing God and appeasing him. The relics of the saints were venerated; people took part in the pilgrimages to holy places; brotherhoods multiplied. Corresponding to this image of popular piety was the Semipelagianism of the late nominalism of a Gabriel Biel in which Luther was trained: *homini facienti quod in se est, Deus dat gratiam* (God gives his grace to the person who does what he or she can do). Luther was not educated in a bare orthodoxy but in a theological stream which insisted that the human being needs to put forth maximum effort in order to merit divine grace. Luther took this literally, and his great spiritual effort brought him to the edge of despair. To use a phrase coined by him afterwards, the law had gained entrance into his conscience and would not leave him in peace. His exegetical discovery of the meaning of Romans 1:16-17 can be understood from the viewpoint of this struggle of conscience. Luther had understood that the “righteousness of God” which is revealed in the gospel is the perfect righteousness that is demanded by the law, a righteousness which he was unable to produce. But at last he became aware of the internal connection of the words and understood that this righteousness is that which God gives to the person who has faith, i.e., the righteousness given by the gospel.

So Luther’s great feat was to rehabilitate and interpret in new and radical fashion the theology and the gospel of Paul over against late medieval legalistic, Semipelagian theology and piety. For example, Luther always interpreted the Synoptic Gospels in an “evangelical” sense, that is to say, in a Pauline way, distinguishing the gospel from the law. As a theologian he viewed the human being first and foremost in his or her relation to God (*coram deo*). In relation to fellow humans (*coram hominibus*), the human being has the ability to create a minimum of justice that is necessary for the common life and human welfare (*justitia civilis*, which was highly treasured by Luther). But before God the human being is radically sinful. There is nothing good in him or her, because everything bears the taint of self-love and self-interest. For the sake of Christ, God receives the sinner, forgives, and declares and makes him or her righteous. The initiative belongs radically to God, who accepts the human being moved only by his love manifested in Christ (*sola gratia*). The human being responds to this love or grace by faith alone, which receives the divine righteousness and life and dares to trust in the divine goodness. Faith is not a “work” in the sense of a meritorious performance, for it is the reception of the work of God. Rather, faith is righteousness and life just because it assimilates and is identified with the righteousness and life of God in Christ. Faith is never “mere thinking” or “abstract orthodoxy,” to which it is necessary to add “praxis” in order to breathe life into it, since faith is the daring confidence in God which lives from *his* praxis.

Therefore Luther never tired of opposing the *sola fides* to the scholastic formula of *fides caritate formata*, faith “formed” by charity or love. According to the scholastic notion the Christian possesses a certain intellectual faith which grasps certain divine information. But since such faith is insufficient, and above all ineffectual, it needs to be “formed” or made dynamic by the active element of charity or love. So it is this human activity of love which gives efficacy to faith.

For Luther this is the same as saying that the human being is accepted by God on the basis of the “work” of love. This anthropocentric emphasis throws the human being into uncertainty, since he or she must always ask again and again: “Have I loved enough for God to accept me?” But the theocentric emphasis on the *sola fides* always directs the human being to the love, righteousness, and life of God revealed in the gospel. These are always constant and always give strength and certainty to faith.

But from another viewpoint, according to Luther, faith is a “work”—not in the sense of a meritorious accomplishment, but in the sense that faith fulfills the first commandment of the Decalogue and thus becomes the “chief work.” Luther expounds faith in this sense in his “Treatise on Good Works” of 1520, which can be considered the first Evangelical ethic.<sup>8</sup> In the first commandment God declares that he is and promises to be *our* God; he therefore demands that we hold to him alone as God and that we put aside all other deities. Faith is the human response of complete confidence in God, which lets him alone be God. So faith is both the human response to the divine promise as well as obedience to the fundamental commandment of God. As Luther sees it, all the other commandments flow from the first commandment, which is the “head” of all the rest. The fulfillment of all the remaining commandments is the fulfillment of the first. The commandments of the first table of the Decalogue demand complete faith and confidence in God, in the God of the promise, the God of the gospel. The commandments of the second table demand basically love for the neighbor, which they make explicit in the different concrete relationships of human life. According to Luther, the fundamental work of faith in principle fulfills all the commandments of God and is the essence of all good works. Therefore faith gives birth to love, which is directed basically toward the neighbor.

Luther often says that all of Christian existence is made up of faith and love. But how are faith and love related to each other? Love cannot be complementary to faith, because that would mean that faith depends on love and that love is a condition required for faith to reach its goal. But the *sola fides* excludes any condition that the human being must fulfill for God to accept him or her. Far from being a condition for faith, love is the fruit of faith. Or as Gerhard Ebeling puts it,<sup>9</sup> faith, which is certainty of conscience, frees the human being from worry about himself or herself and about one’s own salvation and gives a person the freedom and the courage to do what is necessary for the neighbor, that is, that which love requires.

For faith is an authentic liberation. It is liberation from the law which thrusts itself into the conscience and demands that we fulfill it in order to be righteous and pleasing to God. It is liberation from the law which brings the accusation against us that we have not loved God or the neighbor. Another way of expressing this is to say that by faith Christ himself intervenes in our conscience and life in order to free us from the law of sin and death. He frees us

<sup>8</sup>“Treatise on Good Works,” *Luther’s Works*, ed. J. Pelikan and H. T. Lehmann (56 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1976) 44.15-114.

<sup>9</sup>Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) 169-170.

from our ego and our worry about our fate. Our salvation is no longer in our hands but in the hands of God. Through the gospel Christ liberates us “in order that I may be his, live under him

in his kingdom and serve him.”<sup>10</sup> We are freed in order to serve Christ, who is present in the neighbor who needs our love. Some of Luther’s most beautiful words are found at the end of his treatise on “The Freedom of a Christian” and speak of faith and love:

We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor. Yet he always remains in God and in his love, as Christ says in John 1 (:51), “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.”<sup>11</sup>

I interpret the last sentence of this quotation to mean: the Christian who has authentic faith in Christ always serves the neighbor in love, because the Christian always lives in Christ by faith and so experiences liberation from the self in order to go out of the self and live in the neighbor.

According to Luther, true works of love are not those that have been fashioned by human religious phantasy, but the deeds commanded by God in the Decalogue. These are for Luther the elementary deeds of the common life in the family, at work, and in public life. His complaint was that these simple, obvious deeds were despised in his time in favor of the ostentatious works that had been made up by the medieval church and popular piety. But God directs us to parents, children, brothers and sisters, the neighbor, and the person in need. That is the place where “faith works through love” (Gal 5:6).<sup>12</sup>

This summary of Luther’s theology may seem very individualistic to present-day theology. However, when Luther speaks of the Christian in the singular, he always presupposes the presence and the life of the church, for no Christian lives alone but is always a part of the community and the communion of the church. This is “the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the word of God.”<sup>13</sup> In fact, the faith and love of the Christian community are the reflection of the kingdom of God and the presence of the kingdom in the world.

### III. LUTHER AND LATIN AMERICAN THEOLOGY

In the quotations from his *Christology* which we selected, Sobrino speaks repeatedly of “access to God.” We may suppose that such access is the attainment of salvation, in whatever way this may be conceived of and interpreted. The traditional Catholicism which Sobrino combats considers access to God to be attained through orthodox faith expressed as “mere thinking,” or else as

<sup>10</sup>“Small Catechism,” *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 345.

<sup>11</sup>“The Freedom of a Christian,” *Luther’s Works*, 31.345.

<sup>12</sup>It should be stated that Luther denies that this text means that faith justifies through love. He rather maintains that it means that love is the instrument of faith. Ebeling, *Luther*, 173.

<sup>13</sup>“Large Catechism,” *The Book of Concord*, 416.

participation in cultic worship. To this orthodox faith Sobrino opposes the praxis of following Jesus as the means of access to God. It is true that this following of Jesus “is experienced as both a grace and a concrete line of practice.” It is also stated that the historicized love of God is

proclaimed not so that it may be thought about, but that it may be received and shared as liberating love. But it is explained that this process means praxis, which has “supremacy over mere thinking.” “But faith in Jesus attains its maximum radicality when we accept his path as normative and traverse it.” Radically speaking, then, faith in Jesus is a human action; it is following him and traversing his path. This massive emphasis on faith in Jesus as human praxis is apparently clinched by the affirmation that “Jesus sees people becoming just only insofar as they do the work of justice.”

However, from the viewpoint of Luther, such opposition, or perhaps complementarity, between orthodox faith and the practice of following Jesus is not only insufficient or inadequate, but is positively wrong. It is something like a rejuvenated version of *fides caritate formata*. What is at the bottom of the christology of Sobrino from the Lutheran standpoint? In order to attain access to God, which is salvation, a fundamental demand is laid down: to follow Jesus in the way in which the circumstances and the situation of Latin America require. I am not insinuating that the following of Jesus is bad or wrong. On the contrary, to follow Jesus in accordance with the circumstances in which we live is always necessary—but it is not necessary as a means or a requirement for obtaining the access to God which is salvation. Rather, it is a consequence of having obtained it. In Lutheran terms, to lay down this demand of the praxis of following Jesus as a means of access to God is to establish a law. And from Luther’s standpoint, such a law will inevitably intrude into the human conscience: “Have I done enough? Have I followed Jesus with enough commitment and radicality? Who can be sure of having achieved it? And if I have not done it, I do not have access to God nor do I have salvation.” In Pauline terms, the law works wrath. The law, even when it dresses itself up in the form of “evangelical demand” in order to obtain access to God, only brings about the knowledge of sin (Rom 3:20).

As a means of access to God, Luther proposes faith alone, without love and without the following of Jesus. Together with Paul, Luther maintains that Jesus Christ—the same Jesus who calls and invites people to follow after him—is the end of the law as a way of righteousness and salvation (Rom 10:4). Through Jesus Christ God intervenes to save humankind. Jesus Christ is the grace and the righteousness of God incarnate (1 Cor 1:30). Justification by faith alone, without the works of the law, means that salvation is the exclusive work of God and that faith is not a “work” in the sense of an accomplishment destined to obtain salvation. Faith is the reception of salvation, and as such it is far from being mere orthodox thinking. Rather “faith is a divine work in us.” It is “a living, daring confidence in God’s grace” which produces in the believer a constant praxis and makes it truly good. It is worthwhile to quote at length the famous passage from Luther which contains these words and which show how all deeds done in faith are good:

Faith is not the human notion and dream that some people call faith. When they see that no improvement of life and no good works follow—although

they can hear and say much about faith—they fall into the error of saying, “faith is not enough; one must do works in order to be righteous and be saved.” This is due to the fact that when they hear the Gospel, they get busy and by their own powers create an idea in their heart which says, “I believe”; they take this then to be a true

faith. But, as it is a human figment and idea that never reaches the depths of the heart, nothing comes of it either, and no improvement follows.

Faith, however, is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God, John 1:12-13. It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different people, in heart and spirit and mind and powers; and it brings with it the Holy Spirit. Oh, it is a living, busy, active mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works, however, is an unbeliever. He gropes and looks around for faith and good works, but knows neither what faith is nor what good works are. Yet he talks and talks, with many words, about faith and good works.

Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge of and confidence in God's grace makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and with all creatures. And this is the work which the Holy Spirit performs in faith. Because of it, without compulsion, a person is ready and glad to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, out of love and praise to God who has shown him this grace. Thus it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire.<sup>14</sup>

The gospel, free from the law, calls, encourages and frees all believers to follow Jesus Christ today and to give themselves in love for the good of the neighbor. "Whoever does not do such works...is an unbeliever." Love's field of action is vast and wide. It is impossible to ask each Christian to do the same deeds of love, since the situation of each one is different. Love adapts itself to the ever-changing needs of life and so is creative. Therefore it is not enough today to limit the activity of love to the ordinary duties of the common life. Today in Latin America there is an urgent need to translate love into justice for oppressed, suffering people. Sobrino is entirely right in interpreting the following of Jesus today in terms of a liberating praxis which seeks to implement "re-creative justice." Leonardo Boff gives expression to the same intuition when he writes:

It is difficult to create for each moment a norm that is inspired in love. Love knows no limits. It demands creative phantasy. It only exists as one gives oneself in the service of others. And one has only by giving. This is the "law" of Christ: that we love one another as God has loved us. That is the only conduct of the new human being, free and liberated by Christ and invited to participate in the new order.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup>"Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans," *Luther's Works*, 35.370-371.

<sup>15</sup>Leonardo Boff, *Jesucristo y la liberación del hombre* (Jesus Christ and the Liberation of Humankind) (Madrid: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1981), 101. This is a quotation from Boff's book *Jesucristo Liberador* which is published in this collection of several of his works. Translation mine.



Christian sectors that have been conscientized as to the urgency for creating new and just structures for Latin American society need to extend an invitation to all Christian people, attempting to involve them in the creation of such structures. At the same time they should be conscious of the fact that it is not possible to expect that every authentic Latin American Christian will take an active part in this struggle. Realistically speaking, these sectors will always be a minority. This minority should not deny the name of Christian to those believers who for one reason or another decide to express their love to the neighbor through more traditional channels of service. The Christian vanguard is not called upon to despise or excommunicate the rest of the Christians but to attempt to raise their consciousness and to respect their own options for service. But they do have every right to insist that such an option be made.

What does Luther have to say to Latin American Christianity today? He issues a very serious warning to praxeological theologies about the danger of falling into a new bondage under the law. And by the message of grace alone and faith alone he frees believers in order to make a liberating option on behalf of the poor and oppressed neighbor.

#### IV. THE VIABILITY OF LUTHER TODAY

Having said this, we arrive at the theme of the viability of Luther for Latin America today. Apparently there are several difficulties which place obstacles in the way of Luther's theology in Latin America. We shall leave it to other essays presented in this consultation to throw light on some of the more notorious difficulties, above all, Luther's teaching about the two kingdoms, the two forms in which God governs the world. For our part, we shall make a list of factors which have been interpreted as obstacles. It is said that the following matters block the path for Luther's theology in Latin America: the Lutheran tradition (which is common to all of Christianity) of works of charity done on the individual level; a certain Lutheran tradition of social, economic, and political conservatism (which is only in part attributable to Luther himself); a certain supposedly Lutheran tradition of ethical passivism, existing by reason of the fear of falling into "justification by works"; and a certain notion that the practice of discipleship and following the historical Jesus, which is proclaimed in the Synoptic Gospels, is not in harmony with the Pauline and Protestant message of justification by grace and by faith alone.

As far as the first three factors which appear to be difficulties are concerned, it can be stated rapidly that Luther himself repeatedly underlined the creativity of love for the neighbor. So if in the past it was possible to limit love for the neighbor to individual works of charity, our present consciousness of the social nature and conditioning of life no longer permits such a limitation. Today love must be directed to the collective neighbor, and in Latin America it must be translated into liberating justice on behalf of the poor. Regarding Lutheran conservatism in the socio-political sphere, it must be emphasized that we have not been called on to repristinate, preserve, or update the past but to incarnate the evangelical message of the Latin American situation and, if necessary, to rid the Lutheran tradition of its patriarchal or bourgeois traits which at present are an

obstacle. If the reproach is true that large sectors of Lutheranism have justified their ethical

passivism by alleging the danger of salvation by works, it must be pointed out that such an attitude reveals a gross misunderstanding and an abysmal ignorance of Luther's teaching about faith, love, and good works. One single reading of a few of Luther's writings is enough to put to rest such a misunderstanding.

It seems to me that the last obstacle mentioned is the one which should be taken most seriously. It can be readily admitted that the call of Jesus to discipleship and the Pauline message of justification are not on the same theological wave length. The two messages or themes in fact are a response to different situations and needs. But neither do they contradict each other. The call of Jesus to follow him is not a legalistic imposition, but it is possible and necessary in view of the nearness and the presence of the kingdom of God which he preaches. Neither can the perspective of the original readers of the gospels be forgotten. They always realized that the Jesus who calls people to discipleship is identical with the crucified and risen Lord, in whom they had believed and in whose name they had been baptized. The well-known Lutheran Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who hurled his harsh polemic against cheap grace in the name of the costly grace of the discipleship preached by Jesus, always spoke and acted from his rootage in the reality (and not the mere "doctrine") of justification by grace. There is a dialectical relationship between the two messages: justification by grace needs the call to discipleship so that it is not interpreted as a screen for wrongdoing, and the call to discipleship needs justification by grace so that it is not interpreted as an unbearable yoke.

But there are also signs that today in Latin America there is a certain receptivity for the stimulus that Luther can provide, above all as a result of the five-hundredth anniversary of Luther's birth in 1983. Such an authorized spokesperson for Latin American theology as Leonardo Boff writes at the end of a solid essay on "Luther between Reformation and Liberation":

Luther helps us all to understand that liberation originates with the gift of God, who, prior to any historical action on the part of human beings, takes the initiative. This consciousness does not exempt people from the commitment to the struggle. On the contrary, it moves them with greater liberty to throw themselves into doing deeds which are good in the measure in which they liberate the neighbor.<sup>16</sup>

I believe that we evangelical Lutherans should take advantage of the opportunity created by the five-hundredth anniversary to enter into dialogue with a Boff and with other representatives of Latin American theology. As is well known, dialogue is a two-way, not a one-way street. Dialogue never entails the silencing, much less the betrayal, of one's own convictions. I am convinced that the theology of Luther questions very seriously some central affirmations of certain liberation theologians. In this essay I have attempted to give only one example, but a basic one, of such questioning. I suspect that this questioning is related to themes which have always been debated between Roman Catholics and evangelicals of the Reformation tradition and which, in spite of the great

<sup>16</sup>"Lutero entre la reforma y la liberación," 99. Translation mine.

ecumenical dialogue which has been carried on during the past twenty years, and in spite of the inter-confessional agreements reached at national and international levels, have not been satisfactorily resolved. At the same time, who can doubt that the evangelical theology of the Reformation needs to be questioned by Latin American liberation theology?

But beyond theological dialogue, we need to join in solidarity with all Christians in Latin America who struggle for the liberation of the poor. From our perspective, as I see it, this solidarity should be both critical and encouraging: critical when it perceives that God's free grace is being attacked by human presumption, and encouraging because it gains courage in and through this free grace to undertake the path of liberation and at the same time encourages others to take courage from the same inexhaustible source.