

# Re-forming Central America?

Review Article

[ False Prophet

*Let My People Live: Faith and Struggle in Central America*,  
Gordon Spykman, Lance Gratin, Guillermo Cook, Sidney Rooy, Michael Dodson  
and Suhn Stam;  
Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI; 1988, softcover, 271 pages,

*Are We Killing God's Earth? Ecology and Theology*.  
Proceedings of the eleventh symposium of the Institute for Theological Research  
(UNISA)  
held at the University of South Africa in Pretoria 1987.  
W.S. Vorster (ed.); University of South Africa, Pretoria, 118 pages; hardcover.

In 1988, Leonardo Boff, after touring the Soviet Union, said that he found there the culture in which the Holy Spirit is most successfully at work in our time, creating community " That is not the way the turmoil-stricken people of the USSR describe their system today, writes Crisis Publisher, Michael Novak in the January issue.

"Let My People Go" is the end-product of a research project carried out during 1986-87, under the auspices of Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship. The team members had as a mandate to elaborate "a Reformed approach to the crisis in Central America."

This well-written study is extensively documented. The history of Central America is carefully analyzed; and the description of the exploited masses is right on. But are the authors right in their conclusions and projections? I have serious reservations.

## The American Villains

It is fashionable to portray the United States as the villain; the imperialistic power out to devour weaker nations, especially in Central America. This book is no exception. The Sandinistas in Nicaragua are the heroes and the Americans are the bad guys. With approval, the authors quote Tomás Borge, Nicaragua's interior minister, who said, "Nicaragua ... is a country with moral authority not just in Central America, or Latin America, but throughout the world." In their view, the number one enemy of peace and justice in Central America is the U.S. It is held responsible for all the woes and ills in the Third World. The largest democracy in the world has become a convenient scapegoat. But, aren't hunger, political turmoil, instability, tensions and corruption the oldest stories both in Latin and Central America? Why do the authors ignore the literature and testimonies of countless witnesses who report that the Nicaraguan regime is not democratic? It is allied to communist Cuba and Russia.

## A New Reformation

Many Christians have been praying and working for a reformation. Bishop Stephen Neil has observed that most American Protestants didn't hesitate to proselytize in nominal Catholic countries, treating such efforts as much as a mission as outreach in non-Christian countries. They preached salvation by grace alone and faith alone. The Protestant churches have rapidly grown through converts from a Roman Catholic church which was steeped in a theology and practice which had not been affected by Martin Luther and John Calvin. As I read the book, I learned that the Reformation in Latin and Central America had already begun. This depends, of course, on what is

meant by it. The new reformation seems more preoccupied with the life here, than with the life to come.

The authors define reformed as "a reformational, transformational, conversionist world view. Accordingly, it stands for a cultural perspective that calls for the renewal of peoples and the reformation of society in keeping with biblical principles for our life together in God's world." This reformation in Latin and Central America has led to a new church structure within Catholicism-the CEB's (Comunidades Eclesiales de Base or Ecclesial Base Communities). The beginnings of these communities can be traced to Brazil. They soon spread to other Latin American countries and under different names to other parts of the world. Their roots are in Liberation Theology. The liberation theologian, Leonardo Boff says that the communities were given the name "CEB's," "because they are communities primarily comprised of lower-class, grassroots people, the base of society, as opposed to the pinnacle of power in the social pyramid." CEB's raise a number of questions. Is the Gospel for the poor only? Are all the poor our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ? And why must we adopt a new way of reading the Bible? The late Salvadoran Bishop Oscar Romero has said, "The poor have taught me to read the Bible." And the author comments, "Central America's poor also have much to teach North American Christians about what the Spirit is saying to the church today." They also quote with approval, Romero's declaration: "A church which sets itself up only to be well off, to have lots of money and comfort, but that forgets to protest injustices, would not be the true church of our Divine Redeemer." A prophetic stance against injustice is now a new mark of orthodoxy for the church. We are also told to convert to "the world of the poor." I always thought that conversion was towards God and His Word.

### **Truly Reformed?**

What is the nature of this Reformation taking place in Central America? The authors say – a new mark of the church has been added – justice for the poor; a new type of church structure – the CEB's; a new theology – liberation theology. How reformed is this new Reformation?

### **A Critique**

Central America is in crisis. No one will dispute this. The awesome problems of social injustice in Central America should challenge all of us more than at any other time in its sorry history. The untold sufferings cry out for a solution. But along with economic injustices and exploitation by the right and the left, there is one more devastating disease. This involves the moral disintegration of man himself. If our only aim is economic change and political liberation, we are doing the Central Americans a disfavor. A healthy social development always begins with the individual. If a man has been transformed by the Gospel, the changes should filter through into a new lifestyle. And, a changed heart should find its expression in a changed family and community. Furthermore, the Gospel is not only for the poor and the exploited, though the poor have always been more receptive to the Gospel than the rich. The wealthy also have a soul

to lose. They too must hear the Gospel and repent, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved. Poor and rich alike need the Savior. Poverty does not exempt one from conversion. The poor and the rich meet each other at the foot of the cross as needy sinners. This life is not the only one there is. There is a new world coming. This vision of the new world is not a pie-in-the-sky, a salve for festering wounds, but a call to Kingdom work. As we wait for Christ's return, we are to model the new heaven and earth, live our confessions, care for the poor, the fatherless, the widows, seek justice for the exploited. We always live in the now, and the not yet; expecting a new heaven and earth where perfect righteousness, peace and justice will reign forever.

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