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The Problem of Being at Ease in Zion

Gretchen Roeck

Appalachia is a land of beauty and wild landscapes; it is a land that has a rich culture and a tumultuous history. It is a land rich in earthly resources but poor in material wealth. It is a land where family is highly valued; a land where people look for genuineness and compassion. It is a land where

“love, family bonds, and [the] wonder-rolling mountainous landscape ... [stand] in sharp contrast with the poverty, despair, corruption, and general hopelessness that seem to permeate from these hills, just as the love and beauty [of the area] does. The sharp contrast of life’s beauties and tragedies is nowhere more apparent ... [than] among these ancient and mysterious hills” (Graessle 2004).

I have lived among the ancient Appalachian hills of southeastern Kentucky for the past two summers working for the Appalachia Service Project (referred to as either the Project or ASP). For more than thirty years, ASP has been working to address the housing needs of Central Appalachia through the volunteer labor of high school youth and their adult leaders. Each summer I have been blown away by the great levels of poverty in the area, as well as the wealth disparities between Appalachia and rest of America. I see the poverty in Appalachia as representative of other economic disparities both in the wider American community, and in our growing global community as well.

This paper is the beginning of a response to these tremendous economic and societal failures. It is a fight against the sense of disability I experience when I think of the enormity of those problems and failures. It is a part of a continually evolving answer responding to the question of what it means to be Christian in a society where a small minority thrives while a large majority desperately struggles to survive.

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The Appalachia Service Project was started by a Methodist minister, Tex Evans, who in 1969 saw and acted on the region’s immense housing need. Founded on Protestant Christian values, the Project encourages its participants – who are largely high school students sponsored by their church youth groups – to act responsibly in the face of human need and injustice. By transforming faith into

service, volunteers respond to Appalachia's housing need and to God's call. For Tex (the founder), responding to God's call meant more than construction knowledge and experience. It meant a willingness to enter into the communities and homes of central Appalachia with sensitivity, concern and love. By focusing primarily on these three values, Tex aimed for the personal and spiritual development of the families and volunteers, as well as quality emergency home repair.

Tex began ASP in 1969 in Pineville, Kentucky with a group of twenty-six volunteers from Elkhart, Indiana (ASP 2004). In the following years, ASP expanded into Arkansas, Wisconsin, North Carolina, Kentucky, Alabama, Tennessee, Texas, North Dakota and California; then in 1977, the decision was made to concentrate ASP's efforts in Central Appalachia. Since then, ASP has grown tremendously, drawing over 200,000 volunteers from all over the country down to the region since its conception. Although ASP is in operation year round, their central focus is their summer program. This past summer 13,125 volunteers served in twenty-five different counties and repaired 389 homes. While ASP views the home repair work as a means to the development of relationships between the families and volunteers, the projects completed during the summer are remarkable. Home repairs ranged from roof repairs to plumbing installation to the construction of safe exits. Eighteen homes were plumbed for the first time and ninety-three homes were replumbed, four wells were drilled and fourteen septic tanks were installed, nine homes were wired with electricity for the first time and fifty-six homes were rewired due to unsafe conditions (ASP 2004). While ASP was able to reach these 389 families, ASP also had to turn down another 1,767 applicants (ASP).

The presence of this kind of deep poverty in Appalachia has much to do with the development of the region. In the late 1600s scattered development in the Appalachian region began. This kind of growth continued throughout the 1600, 1700 and 1800's allowing the early settlers to live in relative isolation. Then in the late 1800's the entrance of lumbering, railroads and coal mining changed everything (Lewis and Knipe 1978, 10). As Appalachia's tremendous resources, [most particularly that of coal] were discovered the area entered into a period of colonization that has extended into the present day.

The sale of land and minerals was a key turning point in Appalachia's history. As large corporations from outside of Appalachia took over, the economic development of the region was changed forever. As economist David Brooks points out, mining has a very limited ability to:

“provide economic development in a region ... mining processes add little value and do little to stimulate other types of economic activities ... It is advantageous for coal mining to operate in isolation without competing companies. The characteristics of mining lead to a one industry area with labor tied to the one industry and little development outside the extraction of minerals. This also leaves no development when the minerals are gone” (Lewis and Knipe, 1978 19).

An example of such non-development, which has been replicated in many Central Appalachian counties, is found today in the West Virginian county of McDowell. For sometime “McDowell County has been called the billion-dollar coalfields. For years [it was] the highest producing coal county in the country ... Yet until very recently, no community in McDowell County even had a sewage-treatment system” (Ness 2004, 27). Additionally, the housing, the education system and the local water quality is horrible. As one Appalachian activist put it, “Is any business in their right mind that isn’t coal related going to show any interest?” (Ness 2004, 27). The simple answer is no, yet local governments, hoping for increased economic profit, quickly back mining operations, despite “the proof that strip mining [a type of mining that levels mountains in order to extract coal] destroys the land and eradicates the economic base on which continued residence within the region is predicated” (Caudill 2001, 307).

The development and the current state of the Appalachian region is an example of a larger systemic failure of America. The term ‘systemic failure’ refers to failures of the educational, economic, political, and even religious institutions, such as churches, in their inability to critique the malfunctions of the larger social order. By understanding the poverty of Central Appalachia to be representative of a greater whole, this paper seeks to understand the ways in which ASP, as a Christian organization drawing largely from church youth groups for its volunteer base, can contribute to change on a structural level. It is ASP’s religious roots Christianity and basis church communities make such change possible.

Religion opens up the possibility for change because of its place in and relationship to society. Society is developed and sustained by human hands through the process of world construction or world building (Berger 1967, 3). World building is a dialectical process in which humans both act and create a world that acts back and shapes humanity. World building occurs in three steps: externalization, objectivation and internalization. Externalization is creative human activity that produces the world and the institutions humans need to create the borders and boundaries that govern and organize human life. For example, the humanly developed system of capitalism organizes and directs the economic

system. Institutional forms vary from the political and economic to the educational and relational. Objectivation is that same creative activity confronting its producers as external and apart from themselves. In other words, objectification occurs when institutions begin to govern human life with an authority of their own. In relation to the capitalist economic system, humanity has forgotten capitalism's creative human origins. They believe instead that capitalism is self-originating and self-perpetuating, a natural outgrowth of human life. The third step, internalization is the transformation of "structures of the objective world into structures of the subjective consciousness" (Berger 1967 3). This means that institutions are not only perceived as apart from humanity, institutions also shape human consciousness. Such shaping guides and forms personal thoughts about the self, others, and society. Applied to the issue of internalization, capitalism has so entered and shaped the subjective consciousness that all relationships and actions are given a market analysis. Friendships are approached with a "what's-in-it-for-me" attitude, and actions are made on the basis of cost-benefit analysis.

In sum, it is through externalization that society and the world are created and it is through objectivation and internalization that society shapes man. The important message in this dialectical understanding of society is that the world and everything in it is man-made. Poverty is not a social abnormality, nor is it a failing of a particular group of people. Rather, poverty is a socially constructed and socially perpetuated human creation. Despite the dark implications of poverty creation, which include a troubling insight into human nature, the very fact of social creation is uplifting. For it suggests that both the destruction of poverty and the reconstruction of a new social order free of impoverishment are possible.

Typically however, the disabling of social structures and the revelation of a just society is avoided through institutional stability. One of the most historically effective ways of instituting stability and shielding society from chaos is the institution of religion. Religion has been most successful in doing this, because it "is the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant" (Berger 1967, 28). This role of religion is essential to the continuation of human life. Religion, in addition to bestowing meaning, also stabilizes society by legitimating, or in other words, justifying the social order and making sense of irrational situations. Religion is able to do this so effectively because it is able to bestow "an ultimately valid ontological status" upon social institutions (Berger 1967, 33). Historically, the most common way of doing this was to relate a divine cosmos to the humanly constructed nomos – or world through a macro to microcosm relationship, in which the nomos reflects, and is legitimated by the cosmos.¹

In this way, religion affectively orders society, providing meaning and purpose to the lives of those involved. However this ordering process can become dangerous when individuals forget that the world is a social creation of which they are a part. This situation is called alienation. While alienation protects societies from falling into chaos, alienation can also be destructive because it can lead to the establishment of oppressive and dangerous social systems. In such systems, individuals and communities forget that they are actors with real force and power. This is what has happened in American society today. Its effects can be seen in the severe loss of social capital, which refers to social connectedness in all its forms, membership to organizations and churches, informal socializing, voting etc (Bellah 2002 17).

Despite all this, religion is still a prime candidate for leadership in social change because it is able to remove or bestow legitimacy upon other social institutions through its basis in sacred reality. In other words, religion still holds the capacity to act as a world-shaking power. The work of Gustavo Gutiérrez, the Peruvian father of liberation theology, is an example of how religion works as a destabilizing element in society.

The word “example” should be stressed in the sentence above as Gutiérrez’s theology is neither *the* example, nor is it the only mode or model of liberation theology. Liberation theology draws power from its social location. It is a theology firmly planted within a specific historical context. It speaks from this context as a critical and prophetic voice, calling people back from the illusions of their finite time to the true everlasting reality of God. Because it operates so specifically, liberation theology can never be universally applicable. Instead it speaks from and to the depths of human experience, an experience that works with definitive contexts and frameworks. Nonetheless, Gutiérrez’s theology of liberation can still act as a model from which other theologies of liberation may be based. By understanding the spiritual coordinates of Gutiérrez’s theology, first world American Christians can better develop a theology of their own orientated towards the creation of life-giving and life-liberating structures that support all of human life rather than a small portion of it.

...

Both dictionaries and theologians alike define theology as an intellectual understanding of faith. Gutiérrez agrees, adding that faith is a commitment to both God and the neighbor (Gutiérrez 1996, 24). Understanding faith in this way alters the way theology is typically thought of in three ways. First, if faith is

understood as a commitment to both God and others, it immediately becomes an existential question deeply rooted in the identity of the self in relation to God and God's people (humanity). Faith thereby transforms theology into a progressive and continuous, existential and committed search "concerning the Christian's location in the development of humanity and the living out of faith" (Gutiérrez 1996, 24). As a result of this continuous search, theology becomes a kind of reflection. It "is a second act, a turning back, a reflection, that comes after action. Theology is not first; the commitment is" (Gutiérrez 1996, 24).

For Gutiérrez, the role of theology is not to provide believers with specific formulas or easy answers that lead to solutions. Rather, theology's chief function is thoughtful and critical reflection on action, a process which allows for continual renewal and growth (Gutiérrez 1996, 25). Lastly, Christian action and reflection should not be performed alone. Instead thoughtful analysis should accompany the pastoral activity of the church so that liberating action and thought may be orientated, ordered and made coherent. Without thoughtful analysis, action falls into the danger malfunctioning into "sterile and superficial activism" (Gutiérrez 1996, 25). Thus, the thoughtful analysis of theology ensures the true application and relevancy of Christian action in the world directed by the Word of God (Gutiérrez 1996, 25).

On these presuppositions Gutiérrez developed a new kind of theology, now commonly known as liberation theology. Liberation theology is a reflection on creative, deliberate action directed toward the development of a better world and the realization of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom can only be realized through the work of human hands and hearts; and only through the establishment of a world free from oppression, inequality and poverty.

Working for the Kingdom and establishing a world free of poverty means placing the self in opposition to the social order and in line with the poor. Poverty as Gutiérrez's and many other social scientists see it is structural, the result of a social systems which individuals live in, perpetuate and for which they hold responsibility. Acting for the poor means, for Christians, taking a *preferential option for the poor*. Christians are called to opt for the poor on three biblically founded reasons. The first is the example Christ sets by identifying and standing with the poor throughout his life. As followers of Christ, Christians are called to make a similar commitment in their own lives and in their own communities (Brown 1990, 59). Secondly this stance is what Christ taught his followers to do. The service Christ taught went beyond temporary relief, seeking instead to engender self-sufficiency and independence from welfare (Brown 1990, 59). Thirdly, Christ's

existential example of care and love for the poor spanned all aspects of his life – even his death. The lives of his followers should be no exception – opting for the poor should include both lifestyle and social practice (Brown 1990, 59).

Although Gutiérrez's theology may superficially seem like a call to action with religion attached on the side, it is in fact the opposite. Gutiérrez's theology of liberation is a direct result of his reading of the Bible. For Gutiérrez, faith and action are directly and irreversibly linked; separating the two serves to diminish them both. As an expression of this important link, Gutiérrez points to the New Testament idea of neighborly love, an idea which draws and directly expands from the Old Testament.

The Gospel of Matthew (22:34-40) is a perfect example of this idea. In the Gospel scene the Pharisees ask Jesus which commandment is the greatest? Jesus responds by saying "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets". In those four short sentences, Christ announces the essence and foundation of Christianity, which is that love of God is not only inseparable from love of the neighbor, it "is unavoidably expressed *through* love of one's neighbor" (1 John 4:20)(Gutiérrez 1988, 115). Furthermore, it is from such communion and fellowship with one's neighbors that meaning in life is found. Coupled with this realization is the understanding that human mediation is necessary to reach God (Gutiérrez 1988, 113). Thus, to find life's meaning, which is to love as God loves, Christians must practice charity and enter into communion with others. Charity and communion exist only through action and through the development of relationships. But neither charity nor communion is something Christians own or possess. Instead charity is God's love exposed and presented to the world. It is only through such exposure and through continued and committed action that God's-self and God's love is known.

God is not only known through love of the other, God is also present in the other. As Apostle Paul writes, "you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God ... In him [Christ] the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God" (Eph 2:19-22). Every human body hosts God's presence, transforming every encounter with others into an encounter with the Lord. This is especially true for encounters with the marginalized – "An act of love towards them is an act of love towards God" (Gutiérrez 1988, 115).

The call for neighborly love is unhelpful without a definition of the term

neighbor. Neighbor refers not only to the person individually, neighbor also refers "to a person [both Christian and non-Christian] considered in the fabric of social relationships, to a person situated in economic, social, cultural and racial coordinates" (Gutiérrez 1988, 116). Understanding the neighbor in this way means that the love of neighbor extends beyond simply providing food and drink for the poor. It also means working to transform a society that benefits few and harms many. It means, for Gutiérrez, taking revolutionary action on capitalistic social structures that produce death and suffering. As members of the human community, individuals are linked in multiple ways. One linkage is formed at the structural level, through common cultural and economic systems. Another link is located on a more spiritual plan in which individuals are linked together through the love of God. This love is manifested through God's presence in every person (1 Cor 5:16, Eph 2:21-22). As a result of that love, Christians are called to work for and with each other. This work is the essence of neighborly love for it both supports and affirms life.

The outcome of neighborly love is the development of community. Neighborly love challenges the modern structure of society through the ways in which it manifests itself. As it was said earlier, love of neighbor must extend beyond interpersonal charity; it must extend itself to societal transformation. Commitment to the transformation and reformation of society is not a simple task, which is why community is so essential. Authentic commitment always involves great difficulties, which can cause fear and the consideration of other less costly forms of commitment. These are times when community is needed the most (Gutiérrez 1996, 256). Poverty is a difficult and complex thing, and pledging to work against it is a difficult lifelong commitment without a foreseeable end. With these obstacles to face, "All that remains is the conviction that one is doing the Father's will and serving a people which is poor, but even this occurs in a dryness that, despite one's conviction, makes one's tongue cleave to the roof of the mouth (Ps. 137:6)" (Gutiérrez 1996, 256). Holding on to that conviction is part of the reality and the struggle that Christian groups working for liberation face daily.

Christian conviction is reinforced by unique, counter-cultural lifestyles or spiritualities. Spirituality "is a walking in freedom according to the Spirit of love and life", the sustained practice, the on-the-ground application of neighborly love (Gutiérrez 1984, 35). The application of neighborly love finds guidance from both the acknowledgement of Christ and a preferential option for the poor. One of the most outstanding, definitive features of Christ's life was his focus on deeds opposed to words. Through out the Gospels Christ identifies himself with his actions (Mt.

11:2-5) and calls his followers to do the same (Lk. 18:18-25, 6:46-49). Authentic worship of God, Christ taught, occurs “only when it is based on profound personal dispositions, on the creation of true fellowship, and on a real commitment to others, especially the most needy” (Gutiérrez 1988, 133).

Especially the most needy, these words are repeated over and over again in Christ’s call to Christian fellowship and they are central to Gutiérrez’s message. Through Christ’s life, the word of God is read and translated into action (Gutiérrez 1983, 61). It is through Christ that the prophetic calls to justice, as expressed in the Old Testament, are actualized. Christ is the messianic message of the prophets, the proclamation of peace. Prophetic peace “presupposes the establishment of justice, the defense of rights of the poor, the punishment of oppressors, and a life free from the fear of enslavement” (Gutiérrez 1992, 32). The actualization of such peace is not an event which God alone can restore; God also needs the work of human hands. This is why Christ calls his disciples to work for the kingdom, for the establishment of peace.

One of the most difficult things about working for God’s kingdom is that there is no clear set rules or paths to follow. Part of the beauty of God’s work in the world is that it is timeless. As one Biblical scholar put it, “God has chosen to make himself known, not in a ‘static’ image, but in the ambiguity of a dynamic history” (Hanson 2001, 59). As participants in that dynamic history, Christians are called to formulate new and creative responses to the call of God in ways that are relevant to our times. It has been this way throughout history – the book of Deuteronomy was a re-visioning of Yahwistic law in a changing society, and Christ’s call for reform was another response concerning the vocation of believers in the Roman Empire. In both of these examples, religious leaders move within a continuum of their historical context and their rich religious tradition. This is the continual movement religion engages in, always vacillating between the two poles of situation and tradition. When a religion fails to do this, it loses its power and relevance.

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Most recently, American Christianity has faltered in its vacillation between the two poles of the historical situation and the faith tradition, and has become too fixated on the historical situation. Their leanings towards this pole have caused them to forget the call of tradition towards justice and freedom. As a result, middle and upper class Christians find themselves in the personally comfortable (yet socially dangerous) position of being both removed and distanced from the

consequences of their actions and the ramifications of their wealth. The Project (ASP) works lessen this distance and to bridge the gap between rich and poor. It views the cultural differences between the families and the volunteers as openings into God's richness containing unknown potentialities for both parties (Montgomery-Fate, 1991, vi). Perhaps the greatest of these potentialities is the discovery of the profound similarities between the families and volunteers, along with just as many striking differences. The discovery of such similarities and differences can be earth shaking, for they erase many of the superficial separations between volunteers and families – they allow those who were previously considered other to become part of the self. These discoveries require critical reflection and press questions concerning the disparities that ask why. In doing so they shake up the status quo, disrupt complacency and forward for social change.

The Project stretches volunteers not only mentally and spiritually, but also physically in its efforts to help them arrive at this point of critical reflection. It follows in the tradition of liberation theology by coupling reflection with action. In doing so it attempts to put Jürgen Moltmann's claim, "if you are at peace with God, you are at war with the world" (Moltmann 1991, 21) into action. Implicitly this means that the purposes and shape of God's reality are radically and fundamentally different than those of human reality. Thus, if Christians are to be true followers of God they must work to make God's reality their reality. God's sacred reality is presented at various times throughout the Bible. Pauline literature presents a metaphor that is especially helpful for understanding the shape of God's reality. The writer(s) Paul explicitly states in different sections that all of humanity is part of one whole body in Christ (1Cor. 6:15)(Eph.3: 6). So when one section or even member of humanity is in pain, the rest of humanity (like a hurt extremity on the human body) is adversely affected. For Christians this is a call to go to their brothers and sisters in pain and to work to alleviate that pain. Ignoring the pain of others is to ignore the call of Christ and to deny one's identity as a Christian.

God's reality is known not only through Biblical literature but also through divine revelation. God consistently breaks into history as revelation in the form of promise (Moltmann 1991, 86). These promises remind Christians that God is ahead of them. By breaking into history, God opens up human history to God's future. In other words, God's promises release humanity from the confines and restrictions of human society and into God's open and salvific future. Such a "God-revealing event of promise, can find articulated expression only in the midst of, and by reference to, the questionableness of the world as a whole and of human nature itself" (Moltmann 1991, 86). By referencing the "questionableness" of the world

as it presently exists, the promise addresses the future and progression towards that future. By responding to the promise the believer begins on a search for the self “and comes to regard [herself] as an open question addressed to the future of God” (Moltmann 1991, 91). The future of God does not direct the believer out of the world and towards an otherworldly salvation. Rather the future of God places the believer into the process of human history with the vocation to make real God’s Kingdom on earth. Thus, “Man does into gain himself by distinguishing himself from ‘the world’, but by emptying himself into it” (Moltmann 1991, 92).

It is interesting to note here that the emphasis is on the community rather than the individual. While the individual is emphasized, the community stands in the forefront maintaining that there is no such thing as an isolated individual, rather human beings are unique and their qualities personal because of other people involved in their lives. In other words, humanity’s relational reality links individuals together in surprising and concrete ways; each person’s humanity is inextricable from the humanity of others. This emphasis on community is important for it points to and guides how God, its source, is envisioned.

A God that emphasizes and encourages community is one that enters into history, is involved in community, and calls God’s followers to do the same. As Moltmann commented earlier, humanity cannot hope to find itself in distinguished individualism. Rather humanity can only find itself by radically identifying with the rest of the world, through an existential and concrete understanding that human life is inextricably linked. Such an understanding of the self is supported by the conception of God as radically communal. Thinking of God as communal reminds believers of God’s presence in the community of the Trinity. God’s identity within the Trinity can be described by the doctrine of *perichōrēsis*. This doctrine describes the communal unity of the Trinity and has often been translated to be like the bonding love of a family, the essence of fellowship, care and love (Meeks 1989, 112). This kind of love is ideally nonnegotiable, consistent, and ever present. It is the kind of love that binds members together through their differences, creating a bond that allows each being to have a personal role and to offer their own unique contributions to the community. This is the kind of love that unabashedly admits that the self exists only because of and through the other.

This metaphor for God is particularly apt for volunteers involved in the Project. It is often difficult for volunteers to imagine the ways in which they are connected to their families in Appalachia. In other words it is oftentimes problematic for them to make the connection between the continuation of Appalachian poverty and their lives in wealthier areas of the community. Unlike poverty situ-

ations related to sweatshops in Bangladesh, where a more direct cause and effect relationship between Bangladeshi poverty and American wealth can be drawn; the development of poverty in Appalachia in relation to the creation of wealth is more complex.

This is where God as Trinity becomes a helpful metaphor, for God's reality informs and guides the shape and projection of humanity reality. Although volunteers may not see themselves linked to their Appalachian families in concrete and direct ways, in actuality they are involved in each other's lives through the American economic and social system. It is a system that is morally bankrupt and functionally destructive. Writer, farmer, poet and ecologist Wendell Berry discusses the American system by contrasting it with the Kingdom of God. One of the greatest distinctions between the two "economies" – God's Kingdom being the "Great Economy" – as Berry calls them is their comprehension. The problem with the human economy is, in it's depleted comprehension it excludes what it does not comprehend (Berry 1987, 55). It values things and people by their future use. For example, the earth's precious topsoil is valued not in and of its self, but because of what it can produce (Berry 1987, 68). Human beings are valued for how much money that can make and wealth they can garner, or even more commonly, individuals are valued for the way in which they fit into the American machine, for it is their proper functioning as cogs that perpetuate and sustain the system.

Articulating these values leads to questions about human nature (Berry 1987, 148). What makes humanity human? What do individuals need to become fully human? While there may be many answers to this question, the simplest answer is that *humans need each other* – both on very basic and physical levels, but on emotional and spiritual levels as well. The American system works against these basic needs by developing a world in which some will always be left out. The byproduct of such development is the denial of certain persons. By leaving specific groups and certain people out of the system, the implicit emotional message for those groups is: you do not matter and are not valuable.

ASP subversively counteracts this message simply through the work that it engages in and its presence in communities. In an area that has been left behind in multiple ways, the presence of volunteers – new people who are giving up a weeks worth of pay or vacation time – is uplifting. It is a clear statement to the people of Appalachia, regardless of wealth and social standing, that they are important and significant. They are important and significant simply because they are who they are. They are people who have made some mistakes and bad

decisions, people who own the capacity to love and embrace life, people who need others. It is perhaps this realization of the real human need for relationships that is most important aspect of the ASP experience. Individuals do not fail or succeed on their own, rather the rise and fall of humanity takes place within the context of community.

Theology, if it is to be effective and applicable to human life, should reflect this communal context. This is why the concept of God as Trinity is so important – it emphasizes not only human relationships, but also human responsibility in community today. This is why true followers of God should work to reflect God’s reality in the institutional setup of society. Such work should “reflect, in tough-minded, concrete ways and in a language and thought forms of one’s own time” God’s *perichōrēsis* community (McFague 1982, 45).

This is exactly what Gutierrez calls Christians to do. Many have criticized Gutierrez’s theology, along with other liberation theologies, for being too context specific. Gutierrez replies to such criticisms by admitting that his theology along with all other theologies is highly contextualized. Theology’s contextualized nature should not prevent the recognition of its universal message. Theology is not about uniformity, rather it is about communion and the unity that comes from the recognition of the different theologies as all part of a “richly diversified expression of the truth proclaimed by the Only Son” (Gutierrez 1988, xxxvi). These are expressions that question and challenge other sections and groups of believers. They ensure that theology is dynamic and creative, never complacent, presumptive or ultimate. When theology acts and operates in this way it enables the Christian faith to continually and honestly address the world in relation to God’s reality.

While ASP may not radically transform social structures through its work with emergency home repair, it does provide a fertile basis from which a theology of liberation for the volunteers may be developed. The development of such a theology is essential if volunteers are to take seriously their calling as Christians. The theology developed by Gutiérrez provides not an exact template, but model from which other theologies of liberation may be developed. Liberation theology, because it works from within specific historical and cultural situations is always contextual. As Bernhard de Clairvoix wrote, “we drink from our own wells” (Gutiérrez 1984, 5). This means that each culture, each group of people draws from their own experience to inform their faith and spiritual lives. So while Gutiérrez’s theology cannot function as a monolithic program of theology, it does function as a model of theology. It does so by pulling from people’s direct,

tangible experience, thus intimately involving them in the process of liberation. In this way liberation becomes not only the end goal, but also the means of getting to that goal. Through constant action and reflection back on that action in light of the Word of God, Christians participate in God's liberating reality. For ASP volunteers their ASP experience is the action. What is needed, and what this paper begins is creative reflection on that action in regards to the words of the prophets and the life of Christ.

(Endnotes)

¹ It must not be thought from this discussion that God or the Divine is humanly created. Rather the modes (rituals, prayers and other types of worship) used to reach, relate and understand God are humanly created.

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