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A NOTE TO THE READER

The essay in this Occasional Paper was the opening keynote address delivered by Dr. Robert McAfee Brown on November 25 at the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches meeting in Nairobi, Kenya. It should be noted that the various "voices" alluded to in the text were dramatically broadcast and accompanied by slides which visualized the themes of the voices.

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WHO IS THIS JESUS CHRIST WHO FREES AND UNITES?

Robert McAfee Brown

An Opening Comment

We are going to listen to the well-known passage in Matthew in which Jesus confronts his followers with two questions about who he is. In doing so, we will omit the verses dealing with "the keys of the kingdom", not because they are unimportant, but because they are too important to be dealt with briefly.

The Matthew Passage

Consider the setting of this passage. It is placed toward the end of Jesus' public ministry. Things have not been going very well. And so Jesus and his followers leave Galilee and go north to Caesarea-Philippi, to evaluate the kind of response they are getting and to think about what lies ahead. It is a time of crisis for all of them. Listen:

When he came to the territory of Caesarea-Philippi, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do [people] say that the Son of Man is?" They answered, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

(Matt. 16:13-15)

Voice: Yes, Jesus, we believe that you are one of the prophets. You are a forerunner. You are pointing the way - as Elijah did, as Jeremiah did, as John the Baptist did. You speak judgment to the complacent, and you bring hope to the destitute. The Word of God is clearly on your lips.

Another voice (almost interrupting): But you are not the one for whom we wait. We need a God of power - and you are weak. We need a leader with wide appeal - and you are a small town boy. We need someone to challenge Herod - and you concern yourself with fishermen. We need someone to gather all nations under his wing - and you are concerned only for the lost sheep of the house of Israel. No, you are not the one for whom we wait, although you make us yearn for his coming.

A wistful voice: Your dream is a beautiful dream, Jesus. Love, forgiveness, turning the other cheek. But it's only a dream, Jesus, not a reality. It won't work. It never has and it never will. We live in a hard, tough world. People will not tolerate your dream. They will return hate for love. They will kill you if you persist, and your dream will die with you.

Voice: . . . And even if your dream lives on, your followers will turn it into a nightmare. They will use your words to denounce their opponents. They will use the promise of heaven to deny the importance of earth. They will turn your cross into a sword. They will ravage and kill - all in your name.

A woman's voice: Jesus, how can I accept you as Messiah when the church that calls you Messiah denies the worth of my womanhood? I feel excluded when your children proclaim "the brotherhood of man". My sisters and I are only granted subordinate roles in the church of your followers. The assurance that I too am made in God's image is denied when God is described as a masculine God only. It

seems to me a blasphemy that your followers should deny full personhood to the more than half of your children who are women.

Voice: I am a Jew, bearing the original Messianic hope. Through the centuries my people have asked, "What does it take to bring the Messiah?" I look back over the centuries and I see my people being slaughtered. I look toward centuries yet to come and see them being slaughtered still - often by your followers. So I have a problem, and a quarrel, with God: if the world is still so evil, why does the Messiah not come? But your followers, Jesus, will have a problem too: if the Messiah has come, why is the world still so evil? Tell me only this: how could there be an Auschwitz in a world you have redeemed?

A woman's voice: I am in a Latin American prison. I have been tortured because I work for the freedom of my people. My husband has been shot. My children have been told that they must repudiate me. If not, they will be arrested. And then, of course, they will be tortured too. What I want to know, Jesus, is: where are you while I am in prison?

"And you," Jesus asked, "who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." (Matt. 16:15-16)

Voices (chanting): Credo in unum Dominum Jesus Christum, Filium Dei unigenitum. Et ex Patre natum omnia saecula. Deum de Deo, lumen de lumine, Deum Verum de Deo Vero, Genitum, non factum, consubstantialem Patri, per omnia facta sunt . . . I believe . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made . . .

Voice: You are my personal redeemer. You washed away my sins with your own precious blood, giving up your life for me, wretched sinner that I am, so that I could live again. Once I was in captivity to sin; now I am in captivity to you, and it is the only true freedom.

Voice: "My interpretation . . . is that in Jesus' own life is found the key to His nearness to God; that he expressed as no other could, the spirit and will of God. It is in this sense that I see Him and recognize Him as the Son of God." (Gandhi)

Woman's voice: "The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

Voice: "Gott lässt sich aus der Welt herausdrängen an Kreuz . . . Christus nicht hilft kraft seiner Allmacht, sondern kraft seiner Schwachheit, seines Leidens! . . . Die Bibel weist den Menschen an die Ohnmacht und das Leiden Gottes; nur der leidende Gott kann helfen. Der Mensch wird ausgerufen, das Leiden Gottes an der gottlosen Welt mitzuleiden . . . God lets himself be pushed out of the world onto the cross . . . Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering . . . The Bible directs us to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help . . . Man is summoned to share in God's suffering at the hands of a godless world." (Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, July 16 and 18, 1944)

Voice: My experience and the experience of the people in Africa to whom I minister, is that Jesus is our savior. There are many fears and perils that we experienced before he came into our lives - fear of the evil spirits that haunt our forest, fear of pain and sickness, fear of the unknown lurking in the darkness. From these things he has delivered us. Tomorrow holds no terror, since God himself is our companion.

Voice: You strengthen me by your ongoing presence in the sacraments of your church. When I am hungry you feed me with the bread of life, your very body, broken for me. When I am faint, you fortify me with the life-giving wine, your very blood, shed for me. At the beginning of my life you welcomed me into your earthly household with the cleansing water of baptism, and at the end of my life you will welcome me into your eternal household as well.

Woman's voice: I see your face in the faces of the oppressed. I hear your voice in the voices of the poor. I see your action in the action of those who struggle to break the chains of their enslavement. When I reach out to them I find you, for I discover that you are already in the midst of their struggle for liberation from all that binds them - racism, imperialism, class divisions, sexism, institutionalized violence. Wherever people are working for human dignity and wholeness, you are working too.

Woman's voice: I don't know how to talk about you theologically, Jesus. I don't know what it means to say that you are "consubstantial with the Father". All I know is that no matter how hard I try to escape from you, you will not let me go. I deny you - but I discover that you do not deny me. I forget you - but you keep remembering me. I leave you safely inside the church - but then I find you outside the church. I defy your teachings - but I discover that you have forgiven me. I often wish you would just leave me alone - but I know that if you did I would be utterly lost. So if that is what it means to call you the Christ, then you are indeed Christ for me, the Son of the living God.

Voice: "In a society that defines blackness as evil and whiteness as good, the theological significance of Jesus is found in the possibility of human liberation through blackness. Jesus is the black Christ . . . Christ is black. . . because and only because Christ really enters into our world where the poor, the despised, and the black are, disclosing that he is with them, enduring their humiliation and pain and transforming oppressed slaves into liberated servants . . . The 'blackness of Christ', therefore, is not simply a statement about skin color, but rather, the transcendent affirmation that God has not ever, no not ever, left the oppressed alone in struggle. He was with them in Pharaoh's Egypt, is with them in [North] America, Africa and Latin America, and will come in the end of time to consummate fully their human freedom." (Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, p. 215; God of the Oppressed, pp. 135-137)

Peter's voice: You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

Then Jesus said, "Simon son of Jonah, you are favored indeed. You did not learn that from mortal man; it was revealed to you by my heavenly Father." . . . From that time Jesus began to make it clear to his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem and there to suffer much from the elders, chief priests and lawyers, be put to death, and be raised again on the third day. At this Peter took him by the arm and began to rebuke him: "Heaven forbid!" he said. "No, Lord, this shall never happen to you." (Matt. 16:17-18, 21-23)

Peter's voice: Go to Jerusalem? Lord, that would be utter folly. The one place we can't go right now is Jerusalem. It's Passover time and the Roman authorities will be on the lookout for any troublemakers. No, for the time being, we must stay up here where it's safe. Later on, when things quiet down, we can go to Jerusalem.

Voice: Lord, Peter has just acknowledged you as the Messiah, the Christos, God's anointed one. The rest of us agree with him. We too believe that you are the one to redeem Israel. But surely not by suffering and dying! That is not a Messiah's role. Your job is to establish God's Reign, to consummate the Kingdom, and that is the opposite of suffering and dying.

Voice: No one is going to join a movement whose leader is put to death, and who invites his followers to share the same fate. People don't join movements in order to suffer and die but in order not to suffer and die . . . I have believed in you with all my heart, up to this very moment. But if this is where you want to lead us, I'm not sure I can believe any longer.

Peter's voice: They are absolutely right, Lord. Messiahs don't suffer. They conquer. Heaven forbid that you should be put to death. Such a thing shall never happen to you.

Then Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Away with you, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me. You think as [people] think, not as God thinks." (Matt. 16:23)

Initial reactions to the passage

It's all a bit confusing, isn't it? We ask, "Who is this Jesus?" and we are confronted by a bewildering variety of answers: Jesus is "consubstantial with the Father", Jesus is a freedom fighter, Jesus is a prophet, Jesus is a sacramental presence, Jesus is an impractical idealist, Jesus is black, Jesus is the man for others, Jesus is a personal savior. Non-Christians as well as Christians struggle with the question, "Who do [people] say that I am?": Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Camus, Ché Guevara, William Faulkner, Roger Garaudy. And our fellow Christians struggle with the question, "Who do you say that I am?" working in different situations that call for different nuances: John Mbiti, Helder Camara, Beyers Naudé, Kosuke Koyama, César Chavez, Jürgen Moltmann.

Indeed, there can be enough confusion to make us feel just a bit annoyed with God! Surely God could have arranged for a revelation to take place without so many ambiguities! Even Jesus' own disciples, right on the spot, misunderstood what was going on. And if it was hard for them to understand, how much harder it is for us, 2000 years later, with nothing but a few documents in a dialect no one speaks any more. Surely God could have given us more help than this!

But perhaps we should be encouraged, rather than discouraged, by the diversity of answers. Clearly this Jesus cannot be confined by any formula, theological or otherwise. He breaks out of all the little boxes in which we try to imprison him. No sooner have we defined him to our own satisfaction than someone else says to us, "Wait a minute, you have forgotten something . . ." and we discover that indeed we have. As the Fourth Gospel puts it, "There are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I

suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." (John 21:25)

We need not worry if our answers have different emphases. We should worry if our answers are identical, for that would mean that we had imprisoned the living Christ within a formula. So let us take heart from the fact that whenever Jesus' followers have tried to do that, he has always found a way to break out of those limiting bonds. To say with Peter, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," is never the end of the matter, but only the beginning of an ongoing examination of what that answer means. So we must think together not only about the many answers we address to him, but also about the two questions he addresses to us.

The relation between the two questions

The first question goes, "Who do other people say that I am? What are you hearing around town?" Now that is not initially a threatening question. We can deal with it. There are appropriate procedures: we can appoint a committee, interview people, compile a list of answers, issue a report, and then hold a conference to discuss the report. But if we really listen to those answers they may begin to threaten us, for they will remind us that our answers are not the only possible answers, and that our answers must take account of the conflicting answers that other people give. We have an obligation to listen before we proclaim, to know what is being said by the Jew, the Hindu, the Marxist, the humanist, and to believe that we can learn from them, rather than assuming that they must learn exclusively from us.

Only after we have listened to the answers to the first question does Jesus put the second question to us: "Very well, who do you say that I am? What is your verdict?"

Let us linger with that question for a moment. Jesus is asking us, of course, about himself, but he is also forcing us to examine ourselves: "Who am I to whom this question is addressed?" If the "I" is a black African, the nuances of the answer will be different than if the "I" is a white African; if the "I" is in prison, the answer will not be identical with that of the "I" who works on a university campus; if the "I" is a woman, we will learn some things about Jesus that are denied to us as long as the "I" is a man. This is why as we hear one another's answers throughout this assembly we need to know as much as possible about the "I" who is answering.

We need to realize, furthermore, that the "I" who answers the question will be changed both by encounter with the Jesus who is asking the question, and by encounter with others who are answering the question. Each day at Nairobi we will be confronting Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" and each day we will be listening to answers other than our own. Out of such exchanges, our own understandings will change. Answers we do not take at all seriously today may have to be taken very seriously next week, as we are forced to share more fully our backgrounds, questions, anxieties and answers. It is both threatening and liberating to realize that our understanding of Jesus, as well as our understanding of ourselves will be changed in the process. It may be even more threatening and liberating to realize that the process will not stop when Nairobi ends; we must take our new perceptions, commitments and challenges back to Tokyo, Constantinople, Jakarta, Kiev or Waukesha, and keep the process going.

The limitations of our perspectives

As we begin that process, it would be dishonest for me to ignore the fact that who I am - at least what I symbolize - makes many of you uncomfortable, uneasy, and perhaps even angry. It is an important part of our grappling with Jesus' questions to face this openly and honestly.

On at least four counts, many of you will have reason for concern. I am white in a world that is unjustly dominated by whites, speaking in a black country to an assembly predominantly non-white. I am a male in a world that is male-dominated in ways that have been destructive for many, if not most, women. I am a member of a relatively affluent class in a world that is overwhelmingly poor and that is manipulated by a small affluent minority. And lastly I am a citizen of the United States of America in a world where both small and large nations are struggling to become free from the political, economic and military domination of the United States of America. Thus I symbolize (though I hope I do not personally embody) the various oppressions that many of you, in the name of the gospel, are struggling to overcome - racism, sexism, classism and imperialism.

It is the final identification that gives me the most difficulty as I stand before you. I love my country, and I am deeply ashamed of it. I am ashamed of it particularly for what it has done, and continues to do, to so many of your countries. If you are from southeast Asia, your land and your families may have been destroyed by that ugliest of all human creations, the United States Air Force B-52 bomber. If you are from Latin America, you may have friends and family who are starving because American businesses exploit them economically, or you may have friends and family who are political prisoners being tortured by techniques that your police learned from our police.

I will not continue the litany of shame; many of you can recite it with greater feeling and detail than I. But I must recognize that what it describes has been terribly destructive for many of you, and I must hope that you can believe that in different, but very deep, ways it has been terribly destructive for me as well. This is not to say that all oppression emanates from Washington, or that to live in the third world is automatically to be endowed with virtue. We know things are not that simplistic. But it is to say that all of us must take seriously Jesus' admonition to look first at the logs within our own eyes before we concentrate on the splinter in someone else's eye. Whether we will dare to be freed by him to do that at Nairobi is one of the things this assembly is all about.

The imperialism of language

I have suggested that imperialism can be destructive, whether political, economic, military or (let us also say in this gathering) ecclesiastical. But there is another imperialism of which I am very conscious today, the imperialism of language. People from the United States automatically assume that English is the true "ecumenical language". This may be an advantage to us, but it is a disadvantage to the great majority of you, for whom English is not your mother tongue. Even the three languages regularly used by the World Council - English, French and German - represent a form of northern hemisphere imperialism, linguistically exploiting the third world.

I cannot do much about political, economic, military or ecclesiastical

imperialism in the next half hour, but I do want to do something, symbolically at least, about linguistic imperialism. There is no reason why the linguistic concessions should always come from you. So as a symbol of my desire to enter into closer solidarity with my sisters and brothers in the third world, and especially in Latin America, where so much evil has been done with the complicity and often active involvement of my government, I am going to give the rest of this speech in Spanish. At least for these moments, let me be the one who is the so-called "dependent", the so-called "underdeveloped", the so-called "impoverished", for the truth is that I was not even competent enough to make my own translation; it had to be made for me. I will stumble and pronounce badly, but if my reason for shifting languages is understood, more that really counts will be communicated by faltering Spanish than would be communicated by flawless English.

So if those of you who are English-speaking delegates will just this once do what non-English speaking delegates almost always have to do, put on your headphones and turn to channel ____, we will continue . . .

(The rest of the address was given in Spanish.)

Peter's problem and ours

Who is this Jesus Christ who frees and unites? Let us put ourselves in Peter's shoes. Peter's role in the episode is astonishing. First he is the hero - the one who gives the right answer to the question, "Who do you say that I am?" But a moment later he is the villain; the spokesperson for God has become the spokesperson for Satan. Peter knew the right words but he didn't know what they meant.

There is an episode early in Jesus' ministry in which his hearers likewise knew the right words but did not know what they meant. (Luke 4:16-30) Jesus went to the synagogue in Nazareth and read the Isaiah passage with its promise that the poor are to have the good news preached to them, that the captives are to be released, that the blind are to have recovery of sight, and that the oppressed are to be set free. (Isaiah 61:1-2) Jesus told his hearers that those very words had been fulfilled and that the Messianic age had dawned.

And what was the reaction of Jesus' hearers to the awesome claim that things were being turned upside down? They were enchanted! Luke tells us that "All spoke well of him, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth." (Luke 4:22) They were not threatened at all. They knew the words of the passage so well that they did not realize that good news to the poor could only be bad news to well-fed people like them, that freeing the jailed could only be a threat to the jailers and judges, that liberty for the oppressed could only be bad news for the oppressors. They knew the words but not the meaning.

And just as Jesus later did at Caesarea-Philippi, so here also he had to break through their comfortable assumptions. During a famine in Israel, he reminded them, Elijah was sent by God - not to the Israelites, but to a widow in Sidon, a foreigner! During a time of leprosy in Israel, Elisha was sent by God - not to Israelites, but to Naaman of Syria, another foreigner! God's healing power was being offered to other people, not to them.

And that is when they got upset. Not when they heard the familiar

words, but when Jesus pointed out that the familiar and soothing words had some unfamiliar and disruptive implications, that the words were a threat rather than a comfort. When they heard that, their enchantment turned to anger and they tried to throw him over the cliff.

So let us learn from these Biblical examples that we may know the words but miss the meaning, and that we are most likely to miss the meaning by settling for those interpretations that are most congenial to us and make the least demands on us.

As we deal with the question, "Who is this Jesus Christ who frees and unites?" let us listen particularly to those answers that initially threaten us the most, rather than reassuring ourselves with the answers with which we are already comfortable. If your present answer focuses on Jesus the personal savior, then be willing to confront Jesus the liberator whose social message threatens all the human securities you take for granted. If Jesus the revolutionary is the one who now gives you hope, then hear also the Jesus who reminds you that evil is embodied not only in oppressive social structures but also in every human heart - not only in the heart of the evil oppressor but in your own heart as well.

Three claims

Among the many claims made about Jesus Christ, on which shall we focus our attention? Our assembly theme gives us some direction. The Evanston assembly described Jesus as the Hope of the World, New Delhi described him as the Light of the World, and Uppsala described him as the One Who Makes All Things New. Nairobi describes Jesus as the one who Frees and Unites - Jesus the Liberator, Jesus the Unifier. As I shall suggest later, I believe that we cannot truly put those claims together unless we insert between them a claim that Jesus is also the Divider. As Jesus liberates us, we are required to face the potential divisions that liberation brings, so that we can move toward a truer unity than would otherwise be possible. Let us explore those three claims.

A. Jesus the Liberator

To call Jesus the Liberator narrows our field of inquiry, but it is still immensely broad. From what does Jesus free us, and for what does he free us? I need not elaborate some of the answers on which we could dwell. It has been the Christian experience that Jesus frees us from many things: the wrath of God, the law, sin, death, fear, ideology, racism, oppressors, hunger, wealth. And it has been the Christian experience that he frees us for many things as well: love, caring, suffering, joy, courage, the neighbor, the enemy, a new society, the fruits of the Spirit.

We cannot talk about all of these. Some arbitrary choices must be made and I shall make them. I shall assume that we can take for granted the liberation that Jesus brings in the area of our personal lives; we already know something of that or we would not be here. I shall also assume that we recognize that the false division between a gospel for the individual and a gospel for society is seen to be just that - false. Three further things, then, about Jesus the Liberator:

1. Negatively, he frees us from the false securities by which we try

to make our lives secure. He makes an uncomfortably exclusive claim upon us. We are to give primary allegiance to him, and that means that we can only give secondary allegiance to anyone or anything else. Those other loyalties that have heretofore claimed us turn out to be inadequate and therefore false. They do not free, they destroy, particularly when we build them into the structures of our society.

Take the forms of oppression in our society mentioned a moment ago - racism, sexism, classism, imperialism. Those do not free, they enslave. They not only enslave those on whom they are imposed, they enslave those who do the imposing. If I seek security in my whiteness, I discover that Jesus does not love us according to our skin color, and that skin color confers no special privileges in God's sight. To claim that it does creates barriers rather than destroying them. If I seek security in my maleness, telling myself that "this is a man's world", and that men must make the decisions, I discover that in Christ there is "neither male nor female", and that sexist domination has no place. If I seek security in my class situation, attempting to hold on to the benefits of being relatively affluent, I discover that Jesus' message is addressed centrally to the poor, and that my attempt at class privilege impedes, rather than furthers, the doing of his will. If I seek security in my United States citizenship, I discover that it is the nations whom Christ has called to judgment (Matt. 25:32) and that by his tests - have we fed the hungry? clothed the naked? visited the sick? - not only my nation but all nations are tried and found wanting. Negatively, then, allegiance to Jesus the Liberator can free me from allegiance to those false centers of security.

2. Positively, he frees us for the possibility of seeing the world through eyes other than our own. I offer that phrase as a "non-theological" equivalent for the theological word "conversion". He leads us to a fundamental change of direction, so that the concern of the "other" can become our own concern.

In the midst of much that remains unclear to me, one thing at least becomes increasingly clear: there is a convergence today between the Biblical view of Jesus as Liberator, and the cry of oppressed peoples for liberation. For our own day, to "see the world through eyes other than our own" has simply got to mean seeing it through the eyes of the poor and dispossessed. When the story of Jesus and the story of human oppression are put side by side, they fit. They are simply different versions of the same story. The cry of the hungry is overwhelming. The cry of the politically and economically exploited is overwhelming. The cry of those in prison and under torture is overwhelming. The cry of parents who know that their children are doomed to stunted and warped lives is overwhelming. We cannot meet in Africa, indeed we cannot meet anywhere, and shut our ears to that human cry. There may have been other emphases needed at other points in Christian history when talking about Jesus as Liberator, but I am persuaded (and I hope this assembly is persuaded) that for this time and this place, the claim of Jesus to bring freedom, and the cry of oppressed peoples for freedom, converge and cannot be separated.

People today are in chains, not only the chains of personal guilt and inadequacy and individual shame, but also the chains forged by those who have too much power and have abused it, the chains forged by those who deny freedom to all but themselves, the chains forged by those who use political and economic systems for their own gain and destroy whole peoples and continents in the process.

Gustavo Gutierrez has underlined this point unforgettably. He acknowledges that there is an important form of Christian witness that reaches out to the non-believer, the one for whom belief in God has become difficult if not impossible in "a world come of age". But he insists that the problem for Christians in the third world is not how to reach out to the non-believer, but how to reach out to the non-person - to the one whom the world ignores, or uses and crushes and then discards, the one who is "marginalized", whose cry not only for food but for meaning is simply not heard, whose personhood the rest of us simply deny. We cannot talk about the lordship of Jesus Christ, or the reconciling love of God, or the meaning of the cross, or Jesus as Liberator, unless the cry of those we treat as non-persons is the central thing we hear, unless the vision of a world so structured as to take them into account is the central thing we see, unless we can come to see the world through their eyes.

Where is the gospel imperative for that? Take only one part of the cry, the cry for food, acknowledging that that cry must be heard in relation to agriculture, economics, population control, the use of energy resources and all the rest. Remember, in the midst of all that complexity, that while Jesus said that we do "not live by bread alone", he never pretended that we can live without it. Not only are his stories about the Kingdom of God replete with images of meals, feasts and banquets for the poor and dispossessed, but on a number of occasions he acted in quite scandalous fashion to make sure his followers had bread. He let them break the law of the Sabbath by plucking up grain from the field. When he spoke to a large crowd and it got to be supper time, he did not tell them that food for their souls was enough; he went to extraordinary lengths to see that they had food for their bodies as well - bread and fish, you will recall. And when he wanted to leave his followers the clearest possible reminder of his ongoing presence, what did he leave us? He left us a meal, telling us that to be aware of his presence we should eat and drink. And I have come to believe that the modern equivalent of the Pauline warning about abusing that meal by "eating and drinking judgment upon ourselves", (1 Cor. 11:27-29) is for us to share that meal with Jesus and at the same time deny meals to millions of his children, or even one of his children.

He frees us to see the world through eyes other than our own, and in this day and age that means striving to see the world from the perspective of the poor, the starving, the dispossessed.

3. But it is not enough to "see" something; we must also act upon what we see. And so that means a third thing: Jesus not only frees us from false allegiances so that we can begin to see the world through eyes other than our own, he also frees us for struggle with and on behalf of those "others", who are the poor and dispossessed.

Let me try to suggest some of the things this would have to mean for me; only you can determine what it might mean for you. Since the gospel makes clear that we cannot settle for a world dominated by the white minority, and helps me to see the world through the eyes of non-whites, I can be freed to struggle for a world in which the white minority will no longer have power out of proportion to what is due to it. Since the gospel makes clear that we cannot settle for a world dominated by males, and helps me to see what male domination has done to women (and also to men), I can be freed to struggle for a world in which my maleness will no longer guarantee certain jobs, income or privileges denied to women. Since the gospel makes clear that we cannot settle for a world

dominated by the affluent, and helps me to see the destructive consequences of a system in which 6% of the world's population consumes 40% of the world's resources, I can be freed to struggle for a world in which my own standard of living will have to be significantly lowered, as we work toward a more equitable distribution of the world's resources through a restructuring of our political and economic systems. Since the gospel makes clear that we cannot settle for a world dominated by the United States (or any other nation), and helps me to see how brutal are the attempts of one nation to control the destinies of other nations, I can be freed to struggle for a world in which my nation will no longer be Number One, a world in which an exploited Chilean worker will count for more than the profits of an American corporation, a world in which napalm is no longer an instrument of diplomatic pressure.

I won't do those things very well. It is far easier to speak such words on a podium in Nairobi, Kenya, than to act upon them in California, U.S.A. But part of the liberation they struggle to describe is the liberation that comes from being part of the supportive community that is the church, and the exhilarating discovery that we are not alone in such efforts. We must support and challenge and prod each other in our common allegiance to the smiting and healing Word of God, embodied in Jesus, who promises to free us not only from inner attitudes but from oppressive outer structures as well.

B. Jesus the Divider

And that of course means that Jesus Christ not only liberates. He also divides. That is initially surprising. "Surely", we respond, "it is Satan who divides, not Jesus." Division for the sake of division must indeed be the devil's work. But let us not evade too quickly the reality that in different ways Jesus also is the divider. Consider:

Commitment to Jesus Christ divides Christians from the majority of the human family who make no such commitment. He divides us from the secular colleagues with whom we work, from our Jewish friends with whom we otherwise share so much, from Hindus, Moslems, Buddhists, Marxists and humanists. That is simply a fact of human experience.

But the fact that Jesus divides is not just a sociologically descriptive fact. It has been a reality of the gospel from the very beginning. Remember some of those verses we usually forget: "I have come to set fire to the earth . . . Do you suppose I came to establish peace on earth? No indeed, I have come to bring division." (Luke 12:49,51) In the parallel passage the metaphor is even stronger: "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." (Matt. 10:34) Jesus tells us that because of him a man will be set against his father, a daughter against her mother, that our enemies will be found within our own households. (Matt. 10:35-36) He makes divisions between wise and foolish maidens, sheep and goats, lost and found.

Such divisions continue among his followers. What I have said about Jesus as Liberator has already divided me from those of you who feel that I have betrayed the gospel and made Jesus too political. And yet, persons sitting across the aisle from you may feel that I have not made Jesus political enough, and that I am too conditioned by bourgeois categories to understand the full thrust of liberation. We will find ourselves divided at Nairobi over the application of Jesus' message to racism, or evangelism, or sexism. Believers in

personal salvation will not want salvation politicized; believers in social salvation will not want it privatized.

There is still another way in which Jesus is divider, for, as we saw in examining Jesus' sermon at Nazareth, the good news he brings to one group is (initially at least) bad news to another group. If Jesus' liberating message is good news to the poor, it means that the rich stand to lose something. If slaves are freed, slave owners are threatened. If those in captivity are liberated, those who have kept them in captivity had better beware.

Let us press the point: Christians in Latin America often proclaim the message of liberation in the framework of the Exodus story: if the good news is that God freed the oppressed Israelites from the power of the ancient Pharaohs, then God must be able to free the oppressed today from the power of the modern Pharaohs. And that can hardly be good news to the modern Pharaohs!

Who are these modern Pharaohs? They are the local oligarchies, the tiny minorities who have betrayed their people. But they are also those who have supported the local oligarchies with money, guns, intellectual rationalizations of injustice, and sophisticated torture techniques. Much of that kind of support comes, of course, from the United States and other wealthy nations. So if it is good news to South Americans that God promises to free them from the modern Pharaohs, it can only be bad news to North Americans to discover that according to the Exodus scenario a lot of us are serving in Pharaoh's court, and that Pharaoh is doomed.

Position yourself where you will in such a scenario. I know that it divides me from many of my South American sisters and brothers, who see me as the oppressor who must be conquered. It divides me from most of my North American sisters and brothers, who reject such an analysis emphatically and are outraged that it should be offered as an exposition of the gospel. And it divides me from God and from Jesus Christ - for if the analysis is correct, I am, whether I like it or not, on the wrong side in a struggle in which God has clearly taken sides with the oppressed, the poor, the downtrodden. Jesus is the Divider.

C. Jesus the Unifier

Finally, however, he is the Unifier. Jesus did not come "that all may be divided", he came "that all may be one." (John 17:21)

But this must be said last (as it is now being said) rather than first. For if it is said too quickly, it will underestimate the reality of division, and the unity it proclaims will be superficial. During the civil rights struggle in the United States for example, we discovered that "Black and White Together" had to give way for awhile to "Black Power", and an insistence by Blacks that they work with Blacks alone. Similarly, many women have discovered that they need to meet for awhile without men, in order to learn from one another how to work for their own liberation.

It may be that many of you from the third world cannot really trust people from the first or second world; while some United States critics think that the World Council has been infected with Marxism, you may fear that it has been infiltrated by the C.I.A.! Conversely, some of you from North America or Europe may feel that third world Christians are too sweeping in their condemnations of the church's complicity with capitalism or militarism. It is

important and crucial for us to be able to acknowledge and act out such feelings at this assembly.

But such postures can never be accepted within the Christian community as more than provisional, transitional postures. For the meaning of Jesus Christ is that he finally frees us from such postures. If he is provisionally the Divider, he is not finally the Divider. He is the Unifier.

The world around us exhibits deeper divisions than ever before, perhaps, in human history. Nation lifts up sword against nation, earth's resources and earth's peoples are alike exploited, ploughshares are turned into swords, the "haves" grab from the "have nots" - on and on the dreary litany goes. And we Christians have added to those divisions some further ones of our own - the divisions between Catholic and Protestant, Orthodox and Pentecostal, Anglican and Quaker, Calvinist and Lutheran. These will demand our attention on other occasions during this assembly. Let us stress now the divisions that are of central concern to the entire human family: the divisions between black and white, north and south, rich and poor, left and right, male and female, oppressor and oppressed. What task do those realities lay upon us, meeting in a world whose divisions are also our divisions, and yet meeting in the name of Jesus Christ, who not only frees and divides but also unites?

I think the task is clear. We have to demonstrate that we have been sufficiently freed to go beyond our divisions and begin to embody the unity to which Jesus the Unifier beckons us.

That is easy to say and difficult to accomplish. But because of who Jesus Christ is, it is something we can dare to attempt. In the Matthew passage with which we began, Jesus tells his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die. He does exactly that, exposing himself to the ultimate division and separation residing in the powers of sin and death. He bears the full brunt of their attack, and they destroy him. But it is our faith that the story does not end there, and that in facing those enemies he has overcome them, for, even as was promised, on the third day, God raised him from the dead. Here is our promise that if we too face division and separation, we will find that beyond the division and separation are healing and unity, for Jesus draws us into oneness with him and therefore with one another, just as he is drawn into oneness with his Father.

How do we, here and now, begin to move beyond our divisions toward that kind of unity? There is only one way, and we know what it involves. It involves confession and repentance, before God and to one another. In the days ahead this will involve reaching out toward one another at risk, officially and unofficially, individually and corporately, hoping to be heard and accepted, but willing if necessary to endure rebuff patiently, believing that sooner or later the healing power of the risen Christ can reach across the awesome divisions by which we are presently scarred.

You will have to decide what that means for you. For me it will involve confessing my need for forgiveness from sisters and brothers who have been victimized by a system that has benefited me - Chicanos, Blacks, Asian-Americans and Native Americans in North America, those in southeast Asia who have been the targets of U.S. bombers, those in Latin America, Africa and the rest of Asia who

have been the targets of political or economic coercion originating within my land, those all over the world whose lives as women have been warped because of the thoughtless and cruel ways in which the rest of us have been living our lives as men.

It is not my task to tell you what sins you should confess. But it is my task to suggest that along the path this assembly walks, mutual confession and forgiveness will be important ways in which we respond to Jesus the Unifier. For out of common repentance can come the beginnings of a new common obedience, in which we mutually pledge to struggle together to destroy both the inner attitudes and the outer structures that perpetuate the evils we must eradicate. By such steps toward one another we could begin to embody a little more fully the unity we so easily talk about.

This would be important not only for those of us at Nairobi, but also for those not at Nairobi. When Jesus prayed "that all may be one," he continued "that the world may believe." Imagine what it would mean if it could be said once again of us, as it was said of the early church, "See how these Christians love one another!" (Epistle to Diognetus) So I have a dream for this assembly. It is that we could be sufficiently freed by Jesus Christ to recognize our divisions and work through them, with whatever conflict and threat are necessary, toward a new degree of unity with one another, so that we could be, however imperfectly, a microcosm of what the human family in its totality is meant to be, demonstrating such things as the following: that although I am a citizen of the United States, and you are a citizen of Vietnam, nevertheless both of us are first of all citizens of the Kingdom of God; that although I am a member of the white race and you are a member of the black race, nevertheless both of us are first of all members of the human race, God's all-inclusive family; that although I am male and you are female, both of us are first of all made in God's image, part of a creation God saw as "very good." (Gen. 1:27,31)

To point to such realities is not to lessen the imperative for basic change in the structures of our life that nurture and sustain division. It is in fact to heighten that imperative, for it reminds us that we need not be bound or defined by those structures, and that therefore they are malleable to our needs. We are never permitted to forget that the gospel asserts clearly that no matter how deep our divisions, God's healing grace can reach across them.

So the final note of the gospel is not division or ambiguity or tension or condemnation. It is joy. It is not a joy procured by ignoring what we clearly see going on in this bent and bleeding world, but a joy received by recognizing that in addition to what we clearly see going on, some other things are going on as well. As we look at the world, it seems to be only the shattered world of the cross - love defeated. For most people, as Ignazio Silone has put it, "In the sacred history of humanity on earth, it is still, alas, Good Friday." (preface to And He Did Hide Himself) For most people, but not for all...For Christians, to see Good Friday at its worst is to begin also to see it at its best. For it is our faith that the seeming defeat is turned into a victory, that out of the very worst God can bring the very best, that God is working in our midst--patiently and impatiently, painfully and powerfully, judgmentally and healingly--to fulfill the divine purpose for us. In an astonishing phrase, we are told that Jesus, "for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross." (Hebrews 12:2) It is in the light of the resurrection

faith that we too can affirm that joy and thereby continue to cope with the world that seems to be only the world of the cross, perplexed, to be sure, but not unto despair. (2 Cor. 4:8) Ours is an Easter faith that frees us to respond to God's call to join in the divine struggle, so that as God's children are set free, we too may be set free and thereby united with God and with one another.

A new affirmation

Certain affirmations have dominated past assemblies of the World Council of Churches. At the initial assembly at Amsterdam in 1948 the delegates affirmed: "We intend to stay together." At Evanston in 1954 they affirmed: "We intend to grow together." I suggest to you an affirmation for Nairobi in 1975: "We intend to struggle together"--not only to struggle honestly with one another who are here assembled, but also to begin a struggle together on behalf of all of God's children who are not here assembled, even (and most especially) the non-persons, the "very least" of the sisters and brothers of Jesus Christ our Lord. (Matt. 25:40)

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