

One New Book for the Preacher

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THE DREAM BETRAYED: RELIGIOUS CHALLENGE OF THE WORKING CLASS by Karen L. Bloomquist. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990. 123 pages, \$7.95.

In *The Dream Betrayed: Religious Challenge of the Working Class*, Karen L. Bloomquist undertakes “a reenvisioning of theology and a reconstruction of sin and redemption in the light of an analysis of class realities in American society” (p. 9). She uses the experience of white North American working-class people as the point of departure, but the message of the book speaks to a broader audience because “class [is] a pervasive dynamic that affects all of us” (p. 9).

In the first chapter, Bloomquist describes economic realities in the United States which are creating “uneasiness and disillusionment” with the American dream; for example, because over half the jobs created since 1980 failed to lift families from poverty, eight million more people were poor in 1989 (pp. 11, 12). The seriousness of these realities leads her to ask questions such as these: “And in the midst of this, where is the church?” “How can our pastoral and theological understandings and practice be reconceived so that those who have been and continue to be victimized might be empowered and work together to transform their situations?” (pp. 12, 13). Bloomquist knows the urgent need to answer these questions because of her eight years of parish ministry among working-class parishioners where she “regularly struggled with the challenge of proclaiming grace in the face of the realities of sin in which their lives were immersed” (p. 14).

In chapter two, “The Dilemma of Working People,” there is a delineation of the working class. The working class is individuals who are employed in jobs wherein there is “little inherent meaning or dignity in the work itself” (p. 23). In fact, their jobs often lead them to feel like machines themselves. Characteristic of working-class people’s experience is thus the reality of being under the control of others and a sense of powerlessness. This experience undermines any “biblical understanding that work is meaningful in and of itself,” (p.30) and alienation in the work situation leads working-class individuals to live in a bifurcated reality—a private realm of freedom in the home and family over against a public realm of domination and alienation in the workplace (p. 34). Bloomquist contends that the end result of all this is that working-class people do not believe themselves to be “active historical subjects” able to effect change in the public realm.

With this description in mind, working-class people’s religiosity is the subject of the third chapter, “Religion and the Realities of Class.” Here the author discusses the ways the classism of the church limits its effectiveness in the lives of the working class. Two points are particularly significant: (1) the close identification of the message of the church with the American dream and (2) class bias within the church itself which is communicated through language, organization, and decision-making processes which accommodate the professional/managerial class. Also, “what is selectively *heard* in the church’s preaching and teaching correlates with how working people perceive and interpret reality” (p. 48). The working class’s view of God is therefore

“a distant, hierarchical authority” who is in control and “who at times even works against their interests” (p. 49). Consequently, the working class embrace a “faith” in the American dream which has “individualism, victimization, and privatization” as “a resilient ‘trinity’ reigning over [their] lives” (p. 52).

Bloomquist thus moves to explicate “Theological Perspectives for Addressing Class Realities” in chapter four. Her initial assertions are that theology which addresses class realities will (1) restore the view of a biblical God who wants us to be “subjects in history, actualizing the freedom that God intends for us” and (2) challenge the idolatry of class realities. After a review of the emergence of nineteenth century liberal theology, liberation theology, and political theology as resources, Bloomquist concludes that theology addressing these realities will not be dogmatic; it will be a project in which both pastor and parishioners are engaged “as they discern what is happening in their social reality and discover what God is saying in the midst of it” (p. 67).

In chapters five (“The Domination of Sin”) and six (“The Redemption of American Working Class Reality”), the critical concerns which this new theological project will engage are presented. These concerns are understanding sin as social and historical and revisioning redemption in terms of “how it impels liberating praxis” (p. 89). Bloomquist says that both of these concerns converge in a quest for a “spirituality of social empowerment” (pp. 101-105).

The final chapter, “Church as Midwife of New Communities of Justice,” is Bloomquist’s reflections on how the church must shift its self-understanding and structure in order to live out “an interpretation of God’s redemption through Jesus Christ that involves the transformation of American class realities” (p. 107). From the fundamental assumption that the church must first struggle with classism in its internal life, Bloomquist suggests that (1) our churches become authentically communal spaces “where we discover and celebrate what it means to be a *people* rather than only isolated individuals” (p. 109), (2) our social ministry concentrate on community organizing rather than “finding and helping those who are victims” (p. 111), and (3) the church become a place for purposeful moral deliberation of public issues. Finally, she reminds us:

The church as a community is called to work together with other communities, ever vigilant in challenging those ways through which classism is perpetuated and ever diligent in witnessing to the Reign of God—a vision of just relations, which is at the core of our Christian hope.

Thus, through “an alternative ethic activated by the Spirit,” Bloomquist hopes the church will be enabled “to participate as a midwife in the emergence of new communities that are participatory and empowering of all” (p. 113).

Bloomquist straightforwardly compels us to think about the way what we preach and teach is filtered through the lens of class first by the preacher/teacher and second by the congregants. Her text calls us to be cognizant of this fact, thus inviting us to be accountable in a pastoral-prophetic ministry wherein we name and seek to heal the wounds of class.