

## **“Helpin’ Me Resist and Refuse:” Class-Consciousness and Preaching**

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**Abstract:** *This paper examines how consciousness of class can inform one's preaching. It does this by focusing in three areas. First, it considers how consciousness of the class dynamics in church and society can inform one's strategy in preaching. Issues range from the incorporation of social analysis into preaching to avoiding the potential pitfalls of class-based stereotypes and paternalism. Second, it considers how class-consciousness can affect the preacher's approach to biblical texts. For example, there are distinct challenges that arise when comparing economic orders of the biblical era with those of today. Third, it considers how class-consciousness can affect the development and articulation of theology. In the public sphere, it is important to assess who is speaking publicly about God and how they are speaking about God in relation to the lives of working class peoples. Ultimately, the essay concludes that class-consciousness could revolutionize the content of preaching in churches today in a manner analogous to that of the shift to gender-inclusive language.*

“Preacher man wanna save my soul.  
Don’t nobody wanna save my life.

.....  
I ain’t sittin in your pews less you helpin’ me resist and refuse.”

—The Coup, “Heven Tonite,” a rap song by an Oakland-based group<sup>1</sup>

If preachers are to address the entirety of the human condition, and if they are to join in resisting and refusing powers of oppression, then ultimately—among other things—preachers must develop a consciousness of class that informs their preaching. This paper considers how preachers can achieve this. It demonstrates how class-consciousness can ultimately lead preachers to see their church, their world, the Bible, and even the presence of God in new ways.

### **Bringing Class-Conscious Preaching to the Church and the Larger World**

A fundamental aspect of class-conscious preaching is the necessity of choosing sides. About the relationship of the Church to class conflict, liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez writes, “Neutrality is impossible. It is not a question of admitting or denying a fact which confronts us; rather it is a question of which side are you on.... When the Church rejects the class struggle, it is objectively operating as a part of the prevailing system.”<sup>2</sup> The same point can be made about preachers. Neutrality is not possible. In the context of class conflict, truly liberating preaching inevitably entails solidarity with the working class in the struggle against class exploitation and domination. How this solidarity becomes embodied in the pulpit depends significantly on how

<sup>1</sup> The Coup, *Party Music*, (New York: Tommy Boy Music, 2001), compact disc.

<sup>2</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Christian Solidarity and Class Struggle” in *Must We Choose Sides: Christian Commitment for the ‘80s* (Inter-Religious Task Force for Social Analysis, 1979), 89.

one understands the socioeconomic character of one's congregation and the world outside one's church.<sup>3</sup>

As theologian Mary Catherine Hilkert has argued, there is a need for preachers to equip themselves with the tools of social analysis.<sup>4</sup> Considering one's congregation through the specific lens of class analysis means asking what their class composition is, what their level of class-consciousness is, and what ideological barriers might be present.

To preach from a stance of solidarity with the working class does not necessarily entail a diminished view of the humanity of those belonging to the dominant classes, as if taking sides means one side is more human than the other. In class conflict, the primary struggle is not against the individuals—morally culpable though they are—who belong to the dominant classes but against the institutions that produce class relations. Class power and exploitation are predominantly exercised through corporate and state institutions within an economy that operates according to the norms and practices of private property, markets, hierarchical divisions of labor, elite decision-making, and remuneration based on one's property, power, or production.<sup>5</sup> Awareness of this institutional context runs against the dominant ideological trends of today. Law lecturer and writer Radha D'Souza notes there is a deeply rooted fallacy prevailing in the world "that society is a sum of individuals."<sup>6</sup> She writes that this view mystifies social institutions and deflects attention away from the need to change and transform them. When values are regarded outside of their "social and institutional context," they become idealized, "remote and unattainable."<sup>7</sup>

While I would not promote the use of highly conceptual language regarding institutions and their practices in the pulpit, an understanding of the economic systems that stratify society can inform one's preaching strategy. For example, on more than one occasion in the classroom among seminarians, I have heard the view that a preacher should call to account the middle and upper class members of one's church. I am never clear as to what is meant by this. Should preachers single out CEOs in their congregation for exploiting their workers? Should they encourage guilt-ridden self-flagellation on the part of the congregation for being of a particular class? Two points will help bring clarity to the matter of developing a class-conscious approach to preaching in this instance. First, there is no reason to believe that individual accusation, pulpit harangues, or the promotion of guilt will be of use if one wants to be heard and thoughtfully considered by one's listeners. Speaking of the professional managerial class often referred to as the middle class, Barbara Ehrenreich notes, "Guilt is not a fruitful basis for political renewal, any more than moral superiority, which is often only the mirror image of guilt."<sup>8</sup> One can nevertheless provide people with information, perspectives, stories, and images that enable them to decide for themselves what makes for a responsible Christian life. Second, keeping in mind that institutions through policies, practices, and norms often compel individuals to act in certain

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<sup>3</sup> In a manner similar to what I am presenting here, Justo Gonzalez and Catherine Gonzalez have discussed the need for preachers to read their political situation by being cognizant of their own identity and the identity of their congregation. See Justo Gonzalez and Catherine Gonzalez, *The Liberating Pulpit*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 67-71.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination*, (New York: Continuum, 1997), 177.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Albert, *Parecon: Life After Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2003), 24.

<sup>6</sup> Radha D'Souza, "The Price of Peace," *ZNet*, 10 October 2002, [http://www.zmag.org/sustainers/content/2002-10/03d'souza\\_.cfm](http://www.zmag.org/sustainers/content/2002-10/03d'souza_.cfm) (accessed December 7, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1989), 251.

ways, a sensible moral response in many instances is to address the institution directing the actions of persons rather than the specific persons themselves. The individual members of one's church are not left off the moral hook in taking this approach. In such instances, the best course of morally responsible action is often for the individual members of a church to decide that they want to join together collectively in confronting an institution. Ultimately, the ministries of a church are a community endeavor with a community aim: to proclaim and embody the Kingdom of God, the beloved community of God. A sensible preaching strategy is thus to encourage responsibility by the community as a whole.

Consider this example of how one might preach in a manner informed by an understanding of institutions and guided by appeals to community responsibility. Our case study is a downtown church in an urban area with a congregation composed largely of members of the professional managerial class such as lawyers, doctors, engineers, professors, mid-level managers, and along with some executives. The congregation is predominantly white and comes both from neighborhoods within the city limits and the suburbs. It has a history of participating in charitable causes such as providing financial support and volunteers for a nearby soup kitchen. At the same time, the congregation in general has never made a concerted attempt to understand the causes of hunger or poverty. Even though the congregation has not had a strong activist history, there are members of the congregation who would like the church to assume a greater level of participation in community organizing coalitions fighting for affordable housing and a local living wage ordinance.

In this situation, one might preach on the miracle of the loaves and fish in Matthew 14 by drawing parallels between hunger among the Jewish peasants of ancient Palestine and poverty and hunger today. One can then raise the question of *why* poverty and hunger exists. The question *why* pushes beneath the fact of poverty to its causes and opens the door for reflection on institutions and systems. Dom Helder provided an apt quote for reflecting on the causes of poverty and hunger when he said, "When I give bread to the poor, they call me a saint; but when I ask why people are poor, they call me a communist."<sup>9</sup> Helder realized that in seeking to grasp the *causes* of poverty and hunger one inevitably calls into question the economic order that produces to them. An economic order that places profit above people is an order that allows for some to go hungry while others have more than enough.

When answering the question "why," one might keep in mind the investigative process homiletician Eugene Lowry recommends and describes:

As you move along the process of rejecting the initial answers to the question why, you will move from the superficial 'common sense' answers that are known for their popularity (and from my point of view, their inaccuracy) to the uncommon answer which makes sense in the deepest explanatory way. (*parenthesis mine*)<sup>10</sup>

Lowry urges preachers to guide their congregations in digging up and overturning old notions until a new truth is unearthed.

From a reflection on the causes of poverty and hunger, one can move to a consideration of how to respond. Jesus responds to the problem of hunger with compassion and by implicitly

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<sup>9</sup> Qtd. in Bradley P. Holt, *Thirsty for God: A Brief History of Christian Spirituality*, 2d ed., (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 184.

<sup>10</sup> Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletic Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 47.

calling upon the disciples to act on faith. The disciples are to pool and share their resources. By doing this, they are able to get a glimpse of God's beloved community, a community that contrasts sharply with the economic order of the Roman Empire. Likewise, the congregants of our imagined downtown church have the opportunity to act on faith and get a glimpse of an alternative reality amidst the economic order of today. One response they can make is to act on faith in seeking to meet the immediate needs of the hungry by serving them food. Guarding against paternalism, this response has merit. However, if one is to take seriously Helder's prompting to consider why people are poor and if one is to take seriously the meaning and import of God's beloved community, then one will also consider what additional steps of faith can be taken to move closer to an alternative economic order that places people above profits.

One step might be to struggle for a more just compensation for workers receiving less than a living wage. The living wage movement in the United States began when people working in Baltimore's soup kitchens and homeless shelters noticed that many of those they served had full-time jobs. In response to this situation, a group of religious leaders launched a campaign to persuade Baltimore's City Council to raise the wages of city contract workers.<sup>11</sup> After sharing such a story, the preacher can then call on the congregation to think of how they might act as a community of faith in the struggle against poverty and hunger.

A summary outline can help underscore how the strategy of preaching represented in this example relates to the previous conceptual discussion of the economy. Drawing parallels between the scripture and the present day, the preacher presents the congregation with a perspective that calls into question the general economic order of their own time. The preacher points to how economic institutions in our society operate according to policies and practices that value profit over people. Utilizing the story of Jesus and the disciples providing bread and loaves for the hungry, the preacher gives the congregation an opportunity to think through how they might assume moral responsibility themselves as faithful Christians. The preacher offers a concrete example of how they can collectively express their faith and values. The suggested response seeks to change the institutional policies of local businesses so that their bottom line is not the only factor in deciding how their workers are paid.

Different congregations will require different preaching strategies. In developing a strategy, there are some other issues worth considering. First, there is the matter of preaching across class lines. When preaching to a working class congregation, a preacher might especially want to guard against the paternalism of taking on the role of expert advisor and presuming to know what is best for congregants. In *Preaching to Every Pew*, James Nieman and Thomas Rogers cite instances of preachers mistakenly assuming that they should simplify the content of worship services for poorer members of their church.<sup>12</sup> To counter such paternalism requires education not only in the form of books but in the form of interaction and listening. This is particularly relevant in a class-segregated society where the lives of working class people rarely receive sufficient and accurate representation in the corporate media. Clergy, especially from non-working class backgrounds, can sometimes become insulated from the experiences and perspectives of working class persons. Succumbing to stereotypes of the working class becomes much easier without meaningful contact and knowledge of working class lives.

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<sup>11</sup> Jon Gertner, "What Is a Living Wage?," *New York Times*, 15 January 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/15/magazine/15wage.html?pagewanted=1&ei=5090&en=f7043a8ee7bc6102&ex=1294981200> (accessed August 8, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> James R. Nieman and Thomas G. Rogers, *Preaching to Every Pew: Cross-Cultural Strategies*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 64.

To facilitate an engagement of some depth with the working class, Nieman and Rogers mention the possibility of clergy forming biblical text study groups that include people from different classes.<sup>13</sup> In his book *Preacher in a Hard Hat*, Catholic priest Jim Schmitmeyer recounts how he dealt with the problem of not knowing about the work lives of people in his parish by instituting a “take your pastor to work program.” Through this program, he offered to take workplace tours, join church members for lunch in their workplace break room, or shadow church members as they worked.<sup>14</sup> Involvement in actual working class struggles also affords one the opportunity to learn the conditions and stories of local workers while having the additional benefit of moving from a passive gaze at another’s life to the formation of an actual relationship of solidarity in the midst of an organizing campaign. A national organization called Interfaith Worker Justice provides an Internet listing of centers, coalitions, and committees in cities throughout the United States through which churches can become involved.<sup>15</sup>

Beyond the problem of paternalism and the need for engagement with the working class, cultural dynamics are also important to consider in preaching across class. Because class relations are an integral part of the broader culture in which people live out their lives on a daily basis, preaching across class can be considered a kind of cross-cultural preaching. Thinking of class in terms of culture, however, can be dangerous. In her book *Class Matters*, Betsy Leondar-Wright notes that it is easy to fall into stereotypes in trying to discern class cultures. There is a tremendous amount of cultural diversity within each class, and often class cultures are not readily identifiable.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, Leondar-Wright argues for thinking in terms of class cultures as she points to how people are socialized in terms of whether they have steady employment, whether they expect to experience or have experienced four years at a residential college, and whether they have a sense of geographic, ethnic, or religious rootedness.<sup>17</sup> College and graduate school play a significant role in how people are socialized. Even in seminaries and theological schools, many students and faculty can likely attest to Leondar-Wright’s observation that “self-worth among college-educated middle-class people often rests on feeling smarter than other people.”<sup>18</sup> She notes this is “a major obstacle to cross-class alliance building.”<sup>19</sup> One can imagine that it is also an obstacle to cross-class preaching.

Nieman and Rogers devote a chapter in their book to preaching across class cultures. In doing so, they pay particular attention to how class is internalized in deeply felt ways and shapes one’s perspective of “worth, justice, labor, loyalty, and voice.”<sup>20</sup> They also consider how class influences the way one views different forms of authority: personal, pastoral, and scriptural.<sup>21</sup> Because of the authoritarian roles the dominant classes often assume in workplaces in relation to the working class, pastoral authority is a particularly relevant matter for a class-conscious preacher to consider in order to avoid replicating similar relations in the church. Nieman and

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Jim Schmitmeyer, *Preacher in a Hard Hat: A Guide to Preaching for Pastors and Everyone Else* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006), 9.

<sup>15</sup> See Interfaith Worker Justice, “Local Groups,” <http://www.iwj.org/outreach/lg.html> (accessed December 14, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Betsy Leondar-Wright, *Class Matters: Cross-Class Alliance Building for Middle-Class Activists*, (Gabriola Island, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2005), 16.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Nieman and Rogers, 61.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 64-67.

Rogers note one case in which a pastor “spoke of how difficult it had been to follow a string of pastors who abused and neglected her predominantly working class congregation in the past.”<sup>22</sup> To consciously counter abuses, non-authoritarian ways of preaching can be found in the works of various homileticians. Among such non-authoritarian approaches, there are Fred Craddock’s inductive preaching, John McClure’s collaborative preaching, and Lucy Rose’s conversational preaching.<sup>23</sup>

As an example of how one might develop a sermon that strives to embody a non-authoritarian approach to preaching while also addressing class-related perceptions of self-worth, consider a sermon on the parable of “the rich young man” in Matthew 19. While this parable can rightly be interpreted as having implications directed at the ethical decisions of the wealthy, the parable can also have other implications, some of which are specifically directed to those who are not wealthy. After Jesus tells the story of the rich man who refused to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor, Peter remarks to Jesus that the disciples have left everything to follow him. In reply, Jesus states that the disciples will be rewarded in heaven and that everyone who has left their family, home, and fields, will be rewarded, because “many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

In developing a sermon on this text for a working class congregation, one might draw from the insights of Sennett and Cobb’s book, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. This book explores the difficulties of achieving a sense of personal dignity in a society where poverty can make one feel ashamed, where individualistic notions of success can make one feel inadequate, and where the distribution of societal recognition can make one feel invisible.<sup>24</sup> Cobb contends that the ruling class determines the standards by which people are judged in terms of culture, development, and ability.<sup>25</sup> While more recent scholarship might note that the professional managerial class, as opposed to the elite class, plays a significant role in setting forth these standards, Cobb’s point is still important. Informed by such understandings, a preacher could craft a sermon that leads the congregation through an inductive process that calls upon them to question the values embodied in the American dream and to compare such values to those embodied by the ethic of Jesus. What are Christians to make of the pursuit of upward mobility and the accumulation of wealth when Jesus turns the norms of the dominant society surrounding him on their head by painting a picture where the least of these will be the ones honored in heaven? From whom and from what values are Christians to derive their sense of dignity? A preacher might also keep in mind the observation by Sennett and Cobb that workers who live in a culture with strong working class traditions and a sense of class solidarity achieve a sense of being equals from their relationships with one another, despite how they are treated by their bosses.<sup>26</sup> They note Richard Hoggart’s portrayal of the working class around Paris who had a sense of class pride and a feeling of dignity amidst their oppression because they had one another.<sup>27</sup> Preachers might consider whether congregants have had similar experiences of pride and dignity in unions, worker centers, or the church itself.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>23</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971); John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995); Lucy A. Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997).

<sup>24</sup> Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 22, 58, 68.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 269.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 28-29.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 29.

Another issue to take into account in developing a class-conscious preaching strategy is whether there are people from more than one class in one's congregation. If so, are all of the members aware that class differences exist? Nieman and Rogers note the problem of class differences appearing hidden in churches as the poverty of some remains invisible to others.<sup>28</sup> In addition to a basic recognition of class differences, one might ask how much members from different classes know and care about each other's lives? For example, if working class members who live near a church in an urban community face gentrification, are members from the professional managerial class who come in from the suburbs aware of this and feel it is an issue of importance to them as well? At times, one might have to provide relevant information about local economic circumstances in order to prompt congregants to take collective action.

An additional issue to consider in developing a class-conscious preaching strategy is how experiences of class are often simultaneously experiences of social phenomena such as those pertaining to race, gender, disability, citizenship, and nationality. For example, Jean-Bertrand Aristide during his days as a priest among working class Haitians in Port-au-Prince once emphasized in a homily the way working class Haitians experience heightened exploitation as Haitians at the hands of transnational elites:

In the factories here, the workers of iniquity pay Haitians seven percent of what they pay people in other countries. Isn't that eating the people? Isn't that sucking the blood of my brothers and sisters who work here, of the poor who work in the factories for the big bosses? And every time the big capitalist bosses pay out one dollar, they take in four. When they invest \$400, they make four times that; when they invest \$1,000, they make \$4,000. They make a lot of money, while the little that they pay you can barely buy food enough for you and isn't enough to feed your children, to pay for your rent, to pay all your bills.<sup>29</sup>

One need not deny the multi-dimensional experiences of oppression to speak of class exploitation and domination. Indeed, class becomes better understood when its intersection with other forms of oppression is realized and articulated. Moreover, recognition of such intersections can highlight points of resonance that can serve as entryways to discussing class oppression.

### **Class-Consciousness and the Bible**

Class-conscious preaching entails mapping the economic dynamics of not only the congregation and its surrounding world but also of the biblical text at hand. For the preacher, the immediate problem to be confronted in developing a class-conscious hermeneutic is the difference between the political economy of today and those of biblical times. Among New Testament scholars, for example, there is a general consensus that a "middle class" did not exist in the Roman Empire. A wealthy minority of about 3% of the population owned most of the land while about 7% of the population lived as merchants, traders, special artisans, and veterans. The other 90% lived at a subsistence level or were struggling to get there.<sup>30</sup> Because of this situation,

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<sup>28</sup> Nieman and Rogers, 61.

<sup>29</sup> Jean-Bertrand Aristide, *In the Parish of the Poor: Writings from Haiti*, trans. Amy Wilentz (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 75-76.

<sup>30</sup> Ray Pickett, "Conflict at Corinth" in *A People's History of Christianity*, vol. 1, *Christian Origins*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 118.

New Testament scholar Bruce Malina has gone so far as to say: “Fortunately, most Americans still belong to a middle class, and the New Testament has no words for the middle class.”<sup>31</sup>

While the differences between the political economies of each era are substantial, there are some similarities that arguably provide hermeneutical pathways on which preachers can travel. Although the question of whether or not one owned land was indeed a defining matter of class in the Roman Empire, other social relations often tied to class are pertinent to consider as well.

First, class conflict, then and now, has been defined by relations of unequal power, domination, and exploitation. A text approached with attentiveness to these relations should necessarily compel members of the professional managerial class to consider how these types of relations divide people into classes today. While there are other factors to consider in contemporary class formation, the similarity is enough to present members of the professional managerial class with the question of whether they will join in solidarity with the working class.

A second area in which to pursue possible pathways from the past to the present is in looking at the occupational roles and characteristics within the class systems of each era. In particular, one can draw comparisons between occupations that involve the management of labor, the monopolization of knowledge and skills, the propagation of ideology, and the violent repression of rebellion and subversive politics. Some roles are more analogous than others. For example, in Luke’s parable of the dishonest manager, the manager was likely a slave. Nevertheless, it is significant that he fears losing his position because he is “not strong enough to dig” and “ashamed to beg.”<sup>32</sup> This situation parallels that described by Barbara Ehrenreich in her book on the professional managerial class *Fear of Falling*.<sup>33</sup> The middle class fears falling from its privileged place in society. Perhaps an even more fertile ground for analogy in the New Testament can be found by reflecting upon how the scribes and Pharisees used their monopolization of knowledge and skills to gain a position of privileged authority from which to wield influence over Jewish peasants with their ideas. The class character of the scribes and Pharisees might provide fruitful self-reflection for clergy and other professionals.

A final issue to consider in bringing a class-conscious approach to the Bible is how to interpret parables in which where a person of the elite class serves as a metaphor for God. Debates surrounding these metaphors can be perplexing. One might consider, for example, the interpretations of biblical scholar Warren Carter who brings a high degree of class-consciousness to his study of Matthew. Carter offers seemingly contradictory interpretations of the metaphoric meaning of the householder in the parable of the vineyard laborers (Matt. 20:1-16) and the householder in the parable of the wicked tenants (Matt. 21:33-46). Regarding the householder in the parable of the vineyard laborers, Carter asserts that he does not represent God because clues such as “his large accumulation of land” and his failure to address “the inequality of his own wealth” do not support such a conclusion.<sup>34</sup> Carter does claim that in paying each of the workers the same wage the householder did a “Godlike thing” by treating them as equals. Ultimately, however, Carter asserts that “the parable presents him as a cartoon figure with exaggerated and ironic characteristics.”<sup>35</sup> With the parable of the wicked tenants, Carter, by contrast, argues that

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<sup>31</sup> Bruce J. Malina, *The Social Gospel of Jesus: The Kingdom of God in Mediterranean Perspective*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 98.

<sup>32</sup> Luke 16:3.

<sup>33</sup> Ehrenreich

<sup>34</sup> Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 395.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

the householder, who he describes as a “tyrannical landlord,” does indeed represent God.<sup>36</sup> Carter regards this metaphor as part of the gospel’s strategy of imitating “the very system it seeks to oppose.”<sup>37</sup> According to this reading, the final slave who is sent by the absentee landlord and then murdered by the tenants represents Jesus. For the preacher convinced that these two parables are truly devoid of oppressive meanings, the difficulty is in determining what is ironic imitation and how such irony can be meaningfully rendered to a congregation.

### Class-Consciousness and Theology

How might class-consciousness affect the who, where, and how of discerning God’s presence in the world? In terms of who does theology in the public sphere, homiletics scholar Christine Smith speaks of the need for the poor to “do their own theological naming.”<sup>38</sup> Hilkert argues for the importance of preaching by non-dominant groups.<sup>39</sup> One concerted step for moving in this direction with regard to the working class is a national event called “Labor in the Pulpit.” This event is locally coordinated every year on Labor Day weekend by unions and faith organizations. During worship services on this weekend, union members and leaders speak about labor struggles in which they are currently involved.<sup>40</sup> Another intentional step would be to encourage and prepare working class laity for preaching. The Leadership Institute at Allen Temple Baptist Church in Oakland, for example, provides classes in biblical studies, theology, and African American preaching that foster the development of preachers.<sup>41</sup> To take the matter of education for the working class even farther, further research and thought is needed in studying the history and sociology of seminaries and Bible colleges with regard to class. Ostensibly, a key concern in such research would be educational practices that reflect professional elitism. Having noted that the professional elitism of “steep and often arbitrary barriers of education and licensing,” Barbara Ehrenreich asserts that what is needed is not “lowering standards,” but “opening doors: removing artificial barriers and expanding educational opportunities to all comers.”<sup>42</sup>

In terms of the how and where of doing class-conscious theology, one can consider the matter in both historical and contemporary terms. One can look to discern God’s presence in working class struggles for justice both past and present. In his book *The Power of the Poor in History*, Gustavo Gutiérrez argues for looking at history from “the viewpoint of the poor, from a point of departure among the ‘condemned of the earth.’”<sup>43</sup> He contends, “It is in this subversive history that we can have a new faith experience, a new spirituality—a new proclamation of the gospel.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 427.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Christine Smith, *Preaching as Weeping, Confession, and Resistance: Radical Responses to Radical Evil* (Louisville: Westminster/Knox Press, 1992), 152.

<sup>39</sup> Hilkert, 180.

<sup>40</sup> Interfaith Worker Justice, “Labor in the Pulpits, on the Bimah, in the Minbar,” [http://www.iwj.org/outreach/labor\\_day.html](http://www.iwj.org/outreach/labor_day.html) (accessed December 13, 2007).

<sup>41</sup> Leadership Institute at Allen Temple, “The Leadership Institute at Allen Temple,” <http://www.allen-temple.org/web/education/liat/liat.htm> (accessed December 14, 2007).

<sup>42</sup> Ehrenreich, 262.

<sup>43</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 21.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. For a discussion of how preachers can utilize a history attentive to the struggles of the oppressed, see Brooks Berndt, “Radical History, Radical Preaching,” *Homiletic XXXI*, no. 2, (Winter 2006): 29-41.

In facing the present, one not only can look to discern God in campaigns and organizing efforts aimed at improving the circumstances of working class people, one can also look to discern God at work in spaces where glimpses of equitable and cooperative alternatives to the corporate-state economy can be seen. In his book *Economic Justice and Democracy*, Robin Hahnel gives “a critical review of alternative currency systems, employee stock-ownership plans, worker and consumer-owned cooperatives, intentional egalitarian and sustainable living communities, and small experiments in participatory economics in the United States and Canada.”<sup>45</sup> About alternatives that embody an ethic of equitable cooperation, Hahnel notes: “This is the only way to develop the new habits necessary for people to transcend the culture of competition and greed that capitalism breeds.”<sup>46</sup> Concrete references to alternatives are important for preachers to move beyond rhetorical clichés about the beloved community to a viable and tangibly expressed hope. With knowledge of alternatives, preachers can counter socialist Daniel Singer who asserts, “The purpose of our pundits and preachers is to doom as impossible a radical, fundamental transformation of existing society.”<sup>47</sup>

### **Class-Conscious Preaching and the Hope for Tomorrow**

In the end, class-consciousness possesses the potential to revolutionize the content of preaching in churches today in a manner analogous to that of the shift to gender-inclusive language in many churches. The great hope of class-conscious preaching, however, is what it can potentially contribute to life outside the walls of the church. It is in churches joining movements that resist and refuse class oppression that the true hope for economic justice lies.

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<sup>45</sup> Robin Hahnel, *Economic Justice and Democracy: From Competition to Cooperation*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 11.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>47</sup> Daniel Singer, *Prelude to Revolution: France in May 1968*, 2d ed., (Boston: South End Press, 2002), xxvi, quoted in D’Amato, 51.