

Fallacies of Liberation Theology

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Theological movements have rapidly succeeded one another since the end of World War II. The theology of liberation is one of the newer theologies which attempts to re-interpret the Gospel in light of modern knowledge and up-to-date concepts. Liberation theology began at the close of World War II, but it only came into prominence when it was adopted by the World Council of Churches—first in Bangkok in 1973, and then in Nairobi in 1975. It was first articulated by Latin American theologians.

The message of liberation theology is simple: Salvation is *liberation from injustice and every form of exploitation that prevents persons from being “truly human.”* The “salvation” is not defined as personal liberation from sin, but rather liberation from oppression and social inequalities brought on by political and social structures which must be overthrown. The theology of liberation sounds somewhat familiar to the general public because of daily bombardment with the terms women’s liberation, black liberation, gay liberation, etc.

Liberation theology has become the current international ethic for churchmen. Under the name of “the church” and in the name of “social justice,” church leaders are out to free the world from imperialists who have constantly disregarded human rights and have championed racial discrimination. Liberation theologians are convinced that socialism is the necessary precondition for the construction of a just and humane society. Those who hold the liberation views, generally believe that only if the state intervenes, can the way be paved toward a new order in which the needs of people can be met. The present social system must be overthrown and equality must be established, although the liberationists are somewhat vague about how this would work out in actual practice.

The theology of liberation has been grounded in the actual struggles for liberation now going on in certain African and Latin American countries. Gustavo Gutierrez wrote a

book entitled ***A Theology of Liberation*** which is in many ways *the textbook* of this movement. In it he says that liberation theology “is a theological reflection born of the experience of shared efforts to abolish the current unjust situation, and to build a different society, freer and more human.” Present day struggles in Third World countries have given rise to liberation theology.

In much of our denominational literature, the words “liberation” and “salvation” are used interchangeably. One of the gross dangers in the realm of religion today is that theologians *don’t use other words to say the same thing; they use the same words to say something different!* They use the word “salvation” but do not teach biblical salvation as it has been historically defined.

How does the theology of liberation relate to the word of God? Are its basic tenets true to the Scriptures? How shall we view the movement in light of basic Bible principles?

1. THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

The liberation theologians nearly always select themes like the account of the Exodus from Egypt and the **Luke 4** passage telling about Jesus “**preaching deliverance to the captives . . . and to set at liberty them that are bruised**” (**Luke 4:18**). They consistently omit themes like justification and sin, sanctification and holiness, and the second coming of Christ.

Liberty is not the central theme of the Christian faith. In the favorite theme of the liberationists (the Exodus account), note what the Lord told Moses to say to Pharaoh: “**Let My people go that they might serve Me**” (**Exodus 8:1**). The goal for liberation is service and obedience to God, and not some abstract idea of liberty! The people of Israel were shifted from servitude to Pharaoh, to servitude to God! They were not liberated and left to their own devices.

The Gospel accounts are sometimes stretched by the liberationists to the point of portraying Jesus as One who was tolerant of violence when used against justice (for example, the temple-cleansing incident). Thus, during the time of transition, during the overthrow of repressive structures, the oppressed are absolved from inhumanity and brutality. No sense of wrongdoing is associated with such violence. It is quite evident that there is among liberationists, a deliberate twisting of biblical concepts to suit a set of theoretical political principles.

2. THE MEANING OF SALVATION

Salvation according to the Bible relates to man's life in the world, and to his eternal destiny. Gutierrez talks about salvation, but it is defined in terms of building the new society. Conversion is a commitment to (and) the political task of humanizing life on earth. It follows from the position taken by the advocates of liberation theology that salvation is by and through politics.

The liberation concept of salvation is defined in *collective* terms to the virtual exclusion of *individual* redemption. Liberationists frown upon using the phrase, "accepting Christ as *personal* Saviour." The writer in *Brethren Life and Thought*, Spring, 1977, says: "We have tended to stress personal salvation, with little emphasis on the need for the salvation of institutions — big business, the penal system, the legal system, schools, welfare system, and capitalism. We must turn around." To liberationists, the "group" salvation is so important because we need the corporate strength of "the church community" to resist the world's powerful institutions. (See pages 99-100, *Becoming God's People*, The Brethren Press, 1979).

Faithful Christians down through the years have strongly objected to any interpretation of salvation that claims to be biblical, and yet obscures man's need to be saved from sin through faith in the atoning blood of Jesus Christ.

3. THE SINFUL NATURE OF MAN

The liberation theologians do not overlook the sinfulness of man. Personal sin is acknowledged, but they say it exists because of oppressive political and social structures. The liberationists ignore the words of Jesus: "Out of the heart of man proceed evil thoughts . . . all these things come from within and defile the man" (Mark 7:20-23).

Jesus teaches that man is born with an evil nature and with propensities toward iniquity. Liberation theologians say that sin is the result of a bad social and political system, and thus *the overthrow of the oppressive structures* is the primary goal of the new theology.

The root of the liberation theologian's definition of the church's responsibility lies *not* in a biblical view of man, *but* in the Renaissance view of man as one who regenerates himself by his own powers. For more detailed information on this point, see pages 72-73, *Evangelicals and Liberation*, Harvie Conn et al, P & R Publishing Co., 1977. To the liberationist, salvation is *man's effort* to free himself from political, economic, racial, and social oppression.

4. THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

The liberation theologians show practically no appreciation for the church's role as the proclaimer of the unsearchable riches of Jesus, nor of its missionary mandate to win people to Christ. The mission of the church is described exclusively in terms of political liberation.

Gutierrez says that the poor, the diseased, the illiterate, the ignorant, the hopeless – were not intended by God, who loves all men, to be poor. He says, “They were *made* poor.” He goes on to explain that the social system is the enemy. The worst social system is capitalism. Gutierrez calls it “developmentalism”; others called it “colonialism.” The *name* doesn't really matter. It is the capitalistic free enterprise system that must be uprooted.

According to liberation theology, the “church” is the community of all those willing to participate in the struggle for liberation, and not a community of those who have been reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ. But from an evangelical point of view, there is no way such a concept can be squared with the Word of God!

5. THE TEACHING ON ADVERSITY

One of the fundamental messages of the Christian faith is its instructions about how to live under adversity. Paul repeatedly prayed that he would be delivered from his thorn in the flesh, but he was not delivered. Instead, he learned how to live victoriously with his affliction.

All of us soon discover that we are not gods, and that in this life there is a measure of sickness, poverty, and injustice for each person. Sometimes oppression and tyranny, like sickness and suffering, may be a part of God's disciplinary plan for His people. (This does not lessen the wickedness of those who treat others unjustly, but God has sometimes permitted cruel treatment as an act of discipline).

The positive values of suffering, martyrdom, and “the cross” in the Christian experience are overlooked or minimized. The beatitude of the reviled and persecuted (**Matthew 5:11-12**) becomes instead the battle-cry of liberation!

6. THE CONCEPT OF EQUALITY

There is an inescapable contradiction between “liberty” and “equality.” *If men are absolutely free*, inequality must result, because the most able (whether by nature, training, or circumstance) will come out on top. *If*, on the other hand, *men are*

absolutely equal, the liberty of the ablest will necessarily have to be so curtailed as to be non-existent.

Excessive inequality *does* reach heaven (as it did when Israel was in Egypt), but inequality of some kind is an inescapable fact of life. God did not endow us equally. There will never be complete equality on this earth, and perhaps not in heaven either **(Luke 12:48)**.

Jesus gave the parable of the talents, which illustrates the justice- of inequality. Jesus did not say that all should have received the same talents, but only that more would be expected of those who were more richly endowed.

Violence plays an important role in the theology of liberation. Liberationists hold that violence is sometimes necessary to achieve the desired goal. The oppressed sometimes need to show hostility toward the landlord, the businessman, and government officials. The overthrow of the present order seems to be the only alternative. The church becomes a fomenter of dissatisfaction, revolution, and strife. The liberationists are optimistic about solving life's problems by means of a politically re-created society. Liberation theology defends armed intervention by an oppressed population against its oppressors. For more information on this concept, see Rubem Alves, ***A Theology of Hope***, Corpus, 1969. On this basis, the World Council of Churches feels justified in contributing funds to liberation groups in Rhodesia, South Africa, Mozambique, and elsewhere.

Poverty plays an important role in the theology of liberation. The theologians say that "the poor" are "the privileged recipients of the gospel." But to make such a statement is to ignore repeated biblical declarations that God is no respecter of persons. *Lowly shepherds* celebrated Christ's birth, but so did *the wise men*, whose presents indicated that they were wealthy as well as wise!

The Apostle Peter was a lowly and uneducated fisherman, but Paul was a highly educated Pharisee and a member of the establishment. Luke was a doctor and therefore a professional man. Nicodemus and Joseph of Aramathea (who buried Jesus) were rich and were members of the established order. Jesus did say, "**Blessed are ye poor**" – but they were not the only ones who were blessed.

The theology of liberation is the logic behind social activism. The connection between liberation theology and Marxism is obvious. *Everything is to be interpreted in terms of the class struggle.* Revolution is inevitable. Lenin's theory of imperialism is accepted

overwhelmingly. However, most liberation theologians prefer the word “socialism” to “communism” because they look upon the Soviet Union as just another exploiting power. In other words, what the Latin American liberationists have done is to cast Marxism in Christian terms, and to give their movement a foundation in Christian theology.

The destitute and oppressed look to God as the only true Liberator. The “consolation” of Israel (and of the nations) – is a baby in the arms of aged Simeon (**Luke 2:25**), and not a bomb in the hands of an African guerilla! God’s program for the liberation of the wretched of earth lies in the hands of the nail-scarred “wretch” of Calvary!