

# Liberation Theology and the Interpretation of Scripture

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Since the late 1960's, we have seen the emergence of a theology of liberation from the third world countries. It has brought to us not only a new theology but, in the words of Henri Nouwen, "a new spirituality" as well. Liberation theology is a theology *of* the people. It speaks to all of us.

By no means is this article exhaustive on the subject of liberation theology, but I hope it will shed new light for you on a theology that has often been misinterpreted.

Let me take this opportunity to say a special word of thanks to Dr. Alan Neely for his willingness to answer these questions.

—David Roland



### **1. What is your definition of Liberation Theology?**

In the simplest terms it is the theology of the oppressed. Note that I said "of" the oppressed and not "for" the oppressed. It is not a theology done or developed for the oppressed but rather a theology they develop in the context of their suffering.

There are, of course, many kinds of liberation theology today. Not only is there Latin American liberation theology, but there is also feminist, Black, Chicano, Native American, Black African, and Asian such as the Min Jung theology in Korea.

More technically, I would define liberation theology as a dialectical, critical reflection-action on history and practice in light of biblical revelation from within a context of perceived oppression. It is dialectical in that it moves from action to reflection and again to action in continuous fashion. It is biblical in that it attempts to discern and communicate the message of the gospel to the oppressed and the oppressor. And it emerges out of a situation in which there is recognized oppression and injustice that are clearly counter to the purposes of God's kingdom which Jesus specifically set forth.

### **2. Can we equate the rise of Liberation Theology with the increasing gap between the rich and poor in our world today?**

Personally, I am uncomfortable with any single-cause theory given to explain a historical phenomenon. The roots of liberation theology are multiple and complex. Some are secular roots and others are religious. I attempted to sketch some of these in an article I wrote several years ago on the antecedents of liberation theology that was published in *Missiology* (July 1978). Robert McAfee Brown also has a helpful discussion in his book *Theology in a New Key* (Westminster 1978).

Specifically in response to your question, I would say that the gap between rich and poor is not necessarily increasing. Two things are increasing: the numbers of poor and their self-awareness. Likewise, the awareness of the *causes* of worldwide poverty is increasing. Poverty is not inevitable. Neither is it accidental. It is the result of structures and systems, the functioning of which assure the wealth and privilege of the few

at the expense of the many. Liberation theology, especially in Latin America, has confronted this issue forthrightly, named some of the "demons," and taken seriously the words of Jesus when he said, "Happy (or 'Blessed') are you poor; the Kingdom of God is yours" (Luke 6:20).

### **3. Is Liberation Theology only understood by those who struggle for justice and not understood by the satiated and satisfied?**

My answer to this question would be inclusive; that is to say, Christian discipleship can only be understood by those who in fact follow Jesus. It is not a matter of intellectual understanding, but of doing what Jesus called his disciples to do.

My judgment would be that some who are — as you describe them — "satiated and satisfied" would view liberation theology as a threat, while others would see it as nonsensical, cockamamie thinking. On the other hand, there are those persons who are materially secure, but who sense a lacking and a meaninglessness in life. It is not unheard of in Christian history for people like this to divest themselves of their wealth and material security and consciously opt to identify and struggle with the poor. Zacchaeus is a New Testament example (Luke 19:1-10). Millard and Linda Fuller, the founders of Habitat International, are contemporary models. What Millard and Linda did doubtlessly appeared to some of their friends and family as preposterous. I still hear people say about the Fullers: "But was it necessary to give away their wealth?" Clearly Millard and Linda thought so, and what has happened to them and what God has done through them has, I believe, verified the wisdom of their decision.

### **4. What is the moving force behind Liberation Theology?**

I believe that the moving force behind any theology that identifies with the poor and the oppressed is the Spirit of God. When Jesus initiated his public ministry in Nazareth, what he said is significant. He did not say, incidentally, that as a result of his recent study of economic or international politics he was therefore setting forth his own socio-economic agenda. What he said was: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has

chosen me to bring good news to the poor . . . to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people" (Luke 4:18-19).

**5. Liberation Theology presents a different hermeneutic. How do we interpret Scripture in light of Liberation Theology? Are we guilty, as Baptists, of interpreting it in a historical vacuum?**

This is not an easy series of questions to answer, but let me attempt a response by dealing with the last question you asked, namely, are we Baptists guilty of interpreting the Bible in a historical vacuum? My answer would be that we are not. No one interprets the Scripture in a vacuum. This is one of the basic emphases of liberation hermeneutics. Two examples should suffice. During the early decades of the 19th century, many Christians in the United States began to raise serious questions about the institution of slavery. They were aware, of course, that there is not in the Bible — even in the New Testament — a specific prohibition against slavery. There is no eleventh commandment that says: "Thou shalt not hold slaves." The fact is that one could, and many did, marshal a significant number of biblical texts to support the institution of slavery.

The abolitionists read the New Testament and developed a moral, Christian, humanitarian case against slavery. But they did not begin with the New Testament. They began with the tragic, unjust, inhumane, brutal system of the buying and selling of human beings and the exploitation of these men, women, and children for commercial gain. Their moral revulsion stemmed from their reading of the historical situation which in turn affected their reading of the Bible.

Is it a different hermeneutic? My guess is — well, it is more than a guess because I recently participated in a conversation about the exegesis of a text. Five of us theology teachers were discussing how to interpret a text. When asked "What is the first step in interpreting properly a biblical text?", the answers were: "I would translate it"; "I would do the same or read several translations of it and then study the historical background"; and "I would decide on what kind of literature it represents [history, poetry, epistle, apocalypse]." The last one

to comment said that he would do all of these.

A liberation theologian would begin differently: he/she would begin by asking the question, "What is there in my background, my experience that will influence how I interpret this passage?" In other words, a liberation theologian begins with a "hermeneutical suspicion" regarding his/her own prejudices and presuppositions. Likewise, a question would be raised as to what there was in the background and experience of the biblical writer that affected the formation and content of the passage.

Take for example the passage in 1 Corinthians 14:33-35: "As in all the churches of God's people, the women should keep quiet in the meetings. They are not allowed to speak; as the Jewish Law says, they must not be in charge. If they want to find out about something, they should ask their husbands at home. It is a disgraceful thing for a woman to speak in a church meeting."

If I want to follow a liberation hermeneutic, I would first ask myself, "What bias do I have that will affect my understanding of this passage?" I am satisfied that as a 58-year-old white male, my view will be different from that of a young woman who senses God's call to ministry and is longing for a place to serve. But I will also approach the text with a suspicion about the historical context out of which the passage was written. What was there in the first-century Corinthian situation that would prompt such a prejudicial restriction — especially when a few paragraphs earlier Paul had said, "Any woman who prays or proclaims God's message in public worship with nothing on her head disgraces her husband" (1 Cor. 11:5).

The second step in interpretation is — after establishing what is said in a text and why it was said — to determine the relationship between the text in its historical context and what it says to me or to us in our historical context. If we are honest and perceptive, we will recognize that there is always a certain discontinuity between the text and ourselves. I mean by this that there is never an exact parallel between the historical situation out of which the text came and our historical situation. I am certainly obligated to try to know what the writer meant, but certainly it is not always possible. What is possible,

and in a sense more important, is what does this text mean now to me?

John the Baptist came preaching, and on one occasion when the people asked what they should do in response, John declared: "Whoever has two shirts must give one to the man who has none, and whoever has food must share it" (Luke 3:11). Now, I can do many things with this text. I can *historicize* it and say, "This was said to a group of people to whom John was speaking during the time of Jesus' youth. It applied to them and only to them. It has no message for me." I can *suprahistoricize* it, insisting that it is a timeless mandate that proscribes anyone's having more than one shirt or unshared food. Or I can *dehistoricize* the text and say that it represents a general principle to be considered but not taken literally.

The comment by Jose Miguez Bonino (an Argentine theologian), however, is indicative of a liberation approach. He contends that the task of interpretation involves a "circulation" from text to self and back to text again in a continual fashion. This is sometimes called the "hermeneutical circle" or "hermeneutical circulation." Miguez insists that interpretation or exegesis rightly moves back and forth "between the text in its historicity and our historical reading of it in obedience" (*Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*, Fortress, p. 102).

Whether it is legitimate to call this a new hermeneutical approach, I do not know. But it surely places the responsibility of interpretation where it belongs, and it frees all of us to search the Scripture for new light that God can break forth.

**6. You have prepared case studies for other groups which has enabled individuals to see this difference in interpretation. Could you share a couple of examples with us?**

Most of the cases are quite lengthy, so let me summarize one. It concerns a Scandinavian Lutheran seminary teacher in a black evangelical seminary in Namibia.

In 1971, the World Court declared that the occupation of Namibia by the military forces of South Africa was illegal and that Namibia should be given its full and immediate independence.

At the time, Zephania Kameeta was a seminary student who (along with several of his companions) heard by radio the reading of the decision by the World Court. When he and the others returned to class, the missionary professor was lecturing on Romans 13 and emphasizing the admonition, "Let every soul be subject to the higher powers . . . the powers that be are ordained of God."

The students reminded the professor that this text had been used by the South African government for years to justify racial discrimination and more recently apartheid, and that anyone who resisted was labeled Marxist or communist. The students then asked the professor what the text means in the South African-Namibian situation. The professor equivocated.

The case revolves around the dilemma of understanding Romans 13 in the context of government oppression and injustice. Here is a copy of the case and the teaching note, if you can use it.

**7. How can we, as campus ministers, teach college students this kind of interpretation? What do you think college students can learn from this?**

Are you sure you want to do this? If so, I would begin by reading some in liberation hermeneutics, such as the fifth chapter in Miguez Bonino's book I have already mentioned, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*. Also, you would do well to read the chapter on the hermeneutical circle in Juan Luis Segundo's *The Liberation of Theology* (Orbis, 1976). I believe that it is the first chapter. Finally, dip into one of the four volumes by Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname* (Orbis, 1976). These volumes by Cardenal illustrate how a group of peasants in Nicaragua utilized this kind of interpretation.

I would not predict what students can learn from this, but I would hope that they would see several things. First, that no one comes to the Bible without preconceptions which shape the way we all read and understand the text. Also, I would hope that they would see how to enter the hermeneutical circle and follow the process not only by re-reading the Bible, but, more importantly, by re-doing what is revealed. I would wish that they would see that God is not neutral about suffering, oppression, and injustice, and that if we follow Christ, we

cannot be neutral either. Finally, I would hope that they can begin to grasp the radical demand of Christian discipleship, recognizing that we cannot be *for* those who are poor and oppressed without being *against* those forces that perpetuate poverty and oppression.

### **8. How can Liberation Theology help us in Southern Baptist circles?**

Some, I would suspect, would say that liberation theology cannot help us at all, but that it should be denounced and refuted. As in any theological system there are weaknesses, and liberation theology is not above criticism. We make a serious mistake, I believe, if, however, we assume that it has nothing to say to us.

We first need to understand what liberation theologians are saying and why they are saying it. This is best done by reading their writings and listening to them, rather than reading and listening to what others say about them. Most of the criticisms I hear, such as “liberation theology is Marxist,” or “liberation theology advocates violence,” are caricatures and in some cases willful misrepresentations.

Whether we like it or not, liberation theology is not going away, and we will have to deal with it at least in the foreseeable future not only in our own context here in the U.S., but our missionaries are going to have to deal with it in virtually every country where we are allowed to send them.

Liberation theology has arisen out of conditions of human suffering, hurt, pain, exploitation, and injustice. Our Baptist forebears probably would have understood liberation theology better than we, because they knew what poverty, suffering, injustice, oppression, and tyranny meant. Our own history should make us sympathetic to the struggle of others. Moreover, because we are professed followers of Jesus Christ, we should be committed to the liberation of all peoples — liberation from hunger, premature death, persecution by governments, and injustice of any kind.

### **9. While many see Liberation Theology only as a political movement, could you share the importance spirituality plays in Liberation Theology?**



*From its inception, liberation theologians, especially in Latin America, emphasized the role of spiritual development in any liberation project. Gustavo Gutierrez put it this way:*

Talk about God (theo-logy) comes after the silence of prayer and commitment. . . . Our methodology is our spirituality. There is nothing surprising about this. After all, the word "method" comes from *hodos*, "way." Reflection on the mystery of God (for that is what theology is) is possible only in the context of the following of Jesus. Only when one is walking according to the Spirit can one think and proclaim the gratuitous love of the Father for every human being.

This kind of spiritual development cannot be experienced, however, as solitaries. It can never be purely individual.

Spirituality is a community enterprise. It is the passage of a people through the solitude and dangers of the desert, as it carves out its own way in the following of Jesus Christ. The spiritual experience is the well from which we must drink. From it we draw the promise of resurrection (*We Drink from Our Own Wells*, Orbis, 1984, pp. 136, 137).

#### **10. In Baptist campus ministry, we emphasize church involvement. What should be the church's response to Liberation Theology?**

I do not mean to be impudent, but let me turn the question around. Where should the church be involved? Should it be involved in those areas of life where there is need? We would all agree, would we not, that the church should be involved where there is spiritual need. This is basic, and as Gutierrez indicated in the words cited above, meeting spiritual need is indispensable. But the hungry, the homeless, the hurting, the imprisoned, the oppressed are for the most part not coming to our worship services and Bible studies. If the church is to address these needs, someone will have to go out into those places where the needy are struggling and suffering.

Do we not often think of church involvement as *coming* to the church building for church activities, rather than *going* out into the world? I am not ignoring the fact that many churches today have become wellsprings of help to those in physical need with soup kitchens, clothes closets, counseling and advocacy centers, et cetera. For students to be involved in these

ministries is, I believe, the kind of involvement that will initiate an understanding of what it means to follow Jesus Christ today.