

LIBERATION THEOLOGY

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Liberation theology¹ has been the most popular theological theme of the last two decades. This theology is new,² different, and comes from the third world. Widely acclaimed as the theology of the future, it presents the most formidable challenge the Western dominant theologies ever have encountered—a theology “destined to rock the world.”³ Liberation theology was born in 1968.⁴ It skyrocketed into prominence and popularity in the seventies, leveled off in the early eighties, and has gone through some difficult times in the last few years.⁵

Liberation theology is a Roman Catholic phenomenon that has found wide acceptance in some Protestant circles. The response from the evangelical world has not been enthusiastic. They consistently criticize this theology for what they perceive as being a reduction of the Gospel to almost exclusively horizontal endeavors.⁶

The Methodology

Liberation theology attempts to interpret the Christian faith from the perspective of the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized people of Latin America—the exploited class that comprises the majority of the population. The fundamental thesis of this theology is that God is on the side of the poor and the oppressed, and that their liberation is his main concern. Therefore, the responsibility of the Christian and the mission of the Church is to join God in this liberating task. Given the circumstances of the continent, the only

way the church and the individual Christian can fulfill their mission is by entering the political arena to help bring about structural changes that are necessary for social justice, even if in extreme cases it means revolutionary uprisings.

Liberation theologians denounce traditional approaches to theology as being too theoretical, too far removed from the world. The church is viewed throughout its history as having paid more attention to the vertical dimension of the gospel, and as having neglected, or at least relegated to a secondary plane, its horizontal dimension where people live their everyday lives, thus spiritualizing away the liberating content of the gospel. Theology, they insist, must be practical and active, not only in interpreting the world but as an agent in its transformation. It is precisely in its intent to be practical, to be relevant to the Latin American reality, that liberation theology departs methodologically from more traditional approaches to theology. It is in its methodology that the real difference lies. Gustavo Gutiérrez, the acknowledged spokesman and systematic theologian of the movement, underlines this fact succinctly when he states that liberation theology is not so much a new theme for reflection but “a new way to do theology.”⁷ Then more specifically, he explains that “theology is reflection, a critical attitude. Theology follows. It is a second step. What Hegel used to say about philosophy can likewise be applied to theology. It “rises at sundown,”⁸ that is to say, one can reflect only after engaging in action; theology is the byproduct of liberating *praxis*.

Juan Luis Segundo agrees: “Liberation theology deals not so much with content as with the method used to theologize in the face of our real life situation.”⁹ There are three visible main steps in this new way of doing theology which set it apart as “new” and different from what went before. In the first place, it takes a different point of departure. Traditionally theology has begun with Scripture or tradition (with revelation—with the eternal truths given by God), and once understood, the principles were applied to the contemporary situation. Liberation theology has a radically different starting point for the crude historical reality of Latin America, the poverty of the vast majority of its people, and the underdevelopment of the continent. But it is more than an acknowl-

edgment of the situation, it includes an uncompromising act of solidarity with the poor and oppressed.

In the words of Gutiérrez "to characterize Latin America as a dominated and oppressed continent leads one to speak of liberation and above all the participation in the process."¹⁰ According to Bodd:

Before we can do theology, we have to do liberation. The first step for liberation theology is pre-theological. It is a matter of trying to live the commitment of faith. In our case, to participate in some way in the process of liberation, to be committed to the oppressed.¹¹

The action/reflection dialectic is described as *praxis* in liberation theology. The term does not necessarily mean practice in the usual sense of theory being applied to a particular situation. It describes rather a circular traffic that always takes place between action and reflection. Tracy points out that *praxis* "is currently understood as a critical relationship between theory and practice whereby each is dialectically transformed by the other."¹² Their view of truth is dynamic rather than conceptual; truth is found at the level of history, not in the realm of ideas. The Gospel truth is done; one must work out the truth rather than discover it intellectually. Truth is not known in abstractness, but in *praxis*, in the midst of involvement in history; in reality there is no truth outside or beyond the concrete historical events in which man participates as agent. The criterion for knowing truth in this approach is not necessarily to be in agreement or disagreement with a previously given revelation, but with effectiveness in transforming history and liberating the oppressed. Historical *praxis* becomes the final tribunal where the truth or falsity of faith is judged.

After an unwavering commitment to liberating *praxis* comes an important second step in this methodology: to uncover the reasons behind the Latin American reality. Because the fundamental concern of liberation theology is with justice, with the liberation of the oppressed, it becomes indispensable to understand the structural causes of poverty. Boff points out that it is necessary

to analyze the causes of the poverty and misery, to see the causal nexus; because poverty is not born by spontaneous generation, neither does it fall from heaven; rather it is generated by unjust relations among men.¹³

This task is facilitated with the help of the social sciences—sociology, economics, political science, and anthropology. But what is the best option to uncover the human and political dimensions of the historical reality of Latin America? If social sciences with a capitalist perspective are used, doing so undoubtedly will yield a distorted picture. They say that poverty and underdevelopment are due to laziness or indolence¹⁴ of the people, or simply lack of development. Enrique Dussel explains that Latin Americans will not accept that the poor are lazy. They are poor, he says, "not because they want to be, but because they are the victims of a system whose benefits go to those making its judgment."¹⁵

The most viable option would appear to be the one that analyzes the situation from the perspective of the masses, from the perspective of the poor and oppressed. At this juncture, they assume that Marxist analysis is the best option at their disposal. Núñez observes that

One of the principal characteristics of liberation theology is the efforts of its authors to make an in-depth study of the Latin American social problem. To that end, they avail themselves of the social sciences. At the time, they take for granted that the best economic and social analysis comes from Karl Marx.¹⁶

This analysis reveals that the problem of Latin America is not one of development or underdevelopment, as it was previously thought. Says Miquez Bonino:

The underdeveloped countries thus were considered backward having reached a lower level than the developed countries. They were obligated, therefore, to repeat more or less faithfully the historical experience of the developed countries in their journey towards modern society.¹⁷

But the situation is rather one of domination/dependence, in which "Latin American underdevelopment is the dark side of Northern development; Northern development is built on third-world underdevelopment."¹⁸ Because the problem is one of domination/dependence, the only solution would seem to be a radical break from the present structures, from the *status quo*, a social revolution that would break the actual dependence. The fact that liberation theologians rely on the Marxist analysis of their societies does not

mean that all of them accept Marxism uncritically, but all acknowledge their debt to it. In the words of Segundo:

Whether everything Marx said is accepted or not, and in whatever way one may conceive his "essential" thinking, there can be no doubt that present-day social thought will be "Marxist" to some extent: that is, profoundly indebted to Marx. In this sense, Latin American theology is certainly Marxist.¹⁹

It is now, as a third step in the hermeneutical process, that liberation theologians turn to the Scriptures. First, we have noticed, comes an *a priori* commitment to the poor that functions as a determining principle; then the analysis of the historical reality of Latin America with a Marxist perspective which provides not only a diagnosis of the situation as one of dependence on capitalism, but also indicates that the only way out of the predicament is liberation, that is, a complete change of structures—political, economic, and social. One suspects that when liberation theologians go to Scriptures it is not in search of truth or directives, but rather to find justification or support for positions already taken. Scripture functions for them not as a given, directly inspired by God, but as a witness to what God has done in other historical circumstances. It is not normative, it plays only a secondary, supportive role. In the words of Brazilian liberation theologian Hugo Assmann:

The word of God is no longer a fixed absolute, an eternal proposition we receive before analyzing social conflicts and before committing ourselves to the transformation of historical awareness, analysis, and involvement, that is, from *praxis*. The Bible and the whole Christian tradition do not speak directly to us in our situation. But they remain as a basic reference about how God spoke in quite a different context, which must illuminate his speaking in our context.²⁰

It is not difficult to understand that due to the previous commitment there naturally follows a tendency to be selective in the use of Scripture, to lift up those themes like the exodus, for example, and to neglect other Biblical themes that do not yield immediate meaning to the struggle for liberation. This is not an accusation, it is an integral part of the methodology. Without the slightest hesitation, Segundo justifies this approach:

I hope that it is quite clear that the Bible is not the discourse of a universal God to a universal man. Partiality is justified because we must find, and designate as the Word of God, that part of divine revelation which today, in the light of our concrete historical situation, is most useful for the liberation to which God summons us.²¹

This commitment to revolutionary *praxis* leads the Christian, in a spirit of authentic faith, to a new reading of the Bible and the Christian tradition. It poses the basic concepts and symbols of Christianity anew, in such a way that they do not hamper Christians in their commitment to the revolutionary process but rather help them to shoulder these commitments in a creative way.²²

Because liberation theology develops out of the experience of the poor in search of liberation, "the political question is the first one that we must ask as we approach any biblical passage."²³

As we have indicated, the Exodus of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage became "the privileged text" of Scriptures for liberation theology; it was especially so in the first decade of its development.²⁴ The Exodus seems to portray a situation similar to that of Latin America. Israel suffered under the cruel hand of Pharaoh who benefitted from the work of his slaves. But God, sensitive to their cry, took their side and worked on their behalf until their liberation was accomplished. The theme of the Exodus, and especially some verses of Exodus 3 were mentioned with "impressive frequency" in the documents of Latin America.

I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows. And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey. . . . [to] bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt (Ex. 3:7-10).

In the same way that the Israelites in Egypt cried out in their misery and oppression, the people of Latin America, oppressed and enslaved, cry for a liberating exodus. Even when liberation theologians do not engage in serious exegesis of this "paradigmatic text," the idea, the theme is highly visible in their concerns. Latin America can confidently expect liberation because "the liberator God of the Exodus cannot contradict himself accepting oppression in another historical juncture."²⁵

Evaluating Liberation Theology

It is not an easy task to evaluate liberation theology in the space available, but some key points should be made. In accordance with the Biblical injunction to "test everything [and] hold on to the good" (1 Thess. 5:21, NIV), we must admit that there are some positive aspects in this new theology, some insights that we should gratefully acknowledge. The concern that liberation theologians demonstrate for the poor and their willingness to do something about it is highly commendable. It is true that the church has sometimes been so absorbed by the future that they have tended to neglect the here and now. But the gospel cannot be divorced from life. There can be no separation between orthodoxy and orthopraxis. It also is true that the preoccupation for social justice is a central concern of Scriptures. Concern for the poor, the widow, and the orphan permeates the pages of the Old Testament.²⁶ The incarnation unmistakably shows that God is concerned with those who are in disgrace, and does something about it.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that liberation theology, while expressing a deep and valid concern for justice and the poor has some inherent limitations that can easily lead to a distorted view of the gospel, to an impoverished soteriology, thus severely limiting its usefulness. We will point out two main areas of concern: the secondary role of Scripture and the pervasive influence of Marxist ideology. Liberation theologies, as part of their methodology, insist that God's word is heard in history, in the cry of the oppressed, and that truth is found in *praxis*, not in any objective revelation. It is not what God says in Scripture, but rather what he does in history that has priority. It would seem obvious that a criterion, an objective norm, is needed to evaluate *praxis*, and determine if it is going the right way. As Núñez has well pointed out:

According to evangelical doctrine, Christian conduct has its norm in the objective revelation of the Holy Scriptures. In that sense, the Christian has to know certain principles before acting. Faith and obedience, for example, are an answer to the revelation that God has given of Himself and His works in the Bible. There is already an object of faith and obedience. Otherwise, we would not know what to believe or what to obey.²⁷

It would seem risky to engage in acts of social justice on behalf of the poor *before* listening to what God's Word might have to say about it. The Exodus story also tells us that when Moses engaged himself in "liberating *praxis*" killing the Egyptian before listening to the word of God, he had to retrace his steps and wait patiently for God's instructions. When liberation theology stresses the historical situation as the *locus theologicus*, thus replacing the revelation in Scripture by the revelation of contemporary events, it ignores the fact that there are two mysteries operating in history at the same time—the mystery of salvation and the mystery of evil. The devil, even though vanquished at the cross, still continues active in the world. Consequently, Christians stand in need of an objective norm to distinguish between the divine and the demonic in the events of history and to discern God's presence and absence in history. This is not to deny the hermeneutical importance of the historical situation, but the Bible must not be reduced to our situation.

Stek has observed correctly that a situational hermeneutics, when absolutized, means the silencing of Scriptures, because "it reduces the Bible to a tool (or weapon) that we grasp in our hands to promote whatever cause seems to us to hold hope for the world—for the world as we see it."²⁸ If the questions we address to the Bible are only those suggested by *praxis*, we may miss other questions that the Bible is addressing to us. Goldingay pointed out that

We have to pay attention to the Bible's agenda. And yet the only way to listen to the Bible's concerns, is to come with one's own, to see how it speaks to where we are, but also to allow our questions to be judged, as we find what are the other areas with which the Bible is concerned, about which it has not yet occurred to us to enquire. We must ask our questions, but we must also be wary of letting them be the criterion of how far the Bible needs to be listened to. When we find that there are parts of the Bible that do not speak directly to our concerns, it does not prove the Bible irrelevant; it opens up the possibility that we have not yet asked all the right questions.²⁹

We already have noticed that central to the hermeneutics of liberation theology is the analysis of the continent with the help of social sciences, particularly Marxism. This is no doubt the most important factor influencing liberation theology, and where the

main criticism has constantly focused. Liberation theologians defend this procedure, insisting that there is nothing wrong to use Marxism as a tool of analysis, if one leaves out the objectionable aspects of the ideology. Camara ingeniously argues that Thomas Aquinas gave us an excellent example when he availed himself of the philosophy of Aristotle to help in the formulation of his theology. He observes that Aristotle was regarded by Aquinas' contemporaries as a pagan, a materialistic, a dangerous, and cursed sinner. Still Aquinas was able to "leave out" the objectionable elements of Aristotle's thought, and benefit from the positive.³⁰ If Thomas Aquinas was able to produce a new theological system based on the philosophy of a non-Christian philosopher, there is no reason why theologians today could not create a Christian theology with the help of Marx, another non-Christian philosopher. Camara's reasoning seems convincing to many people. Others, however, question to what extent Thomas Aquinas was successful in leaving out the negative. And this is precisely where liberation theology has become more vulnerable. The real issue has been to what extent can Marxism be used as a tool of scientific analysis without, at the same time, adopting other features of the ideology like its anthropology—not to mention its materialistic *Weltanschauung*.

Marxism is not just another philosophy, which would be relatively harmless, but a philosophy which seeks to change the existing power structures by means of organized political *praxis*.³¹

Critics from inside as well from outside the Roman Catholic Church have raised their voices persistently in warning against the possibility of the use of Marxism merely for its instrumental value. Pedro Arrupe, at the time Jesuit Superior General, sent a letter to the Jesuit Provincials of Latin America warning that it is not possible to accept the set of explanations that constitute Marxist analysis without subscribing to Marxist philosophy, ideology, and politics. He concluded that "those who adopt the [Marxist] analysis also adopt its strategy."³² Peter Heblethwaite has remarked that as a consequence of these efforts Marxism has subtly invaded the church,

- but no one has so far suggested that Marxism leads to Christianity.
- The crucial determining element in the system is Marxism. Christi-

anity, therefore, is not so much synthesized as used and subordinated; when the church comes, it is Christianity that has to go.³³

More recently the German scholar Pannenberg for the first time outlined his uneasiness about liberation theology. He criticized employing Marxism as a sociological tool. Marxism harbors an understanding of the human person that cannot be reconciled with Christianity. According to Pannenberg, the atheistic orientation is not an accidental element in Marx but it is closely connected with the anthropology underlying its social theory. For this reason, it is not possible to use Marxist economic descriptions without accepting also their atheistic reason and implications.³⁴

When we read carefully into this theology, we find that these concerns are justified because liberation theologians have not succeeded in extricating themselves from the framework of this ideology. One gets the distinct impression that liberation theology is, to a large extent, patterned after the main features of Marxism, from the diagnosis of the ills of the continent to the strategies needed to obtain historical change, even to the goals of liberation itself. Due to the ideological bias of its social analysis, liberation theology tends to divide society sharply into two classes, viz., the rich and the poor, the oppressed and the oppressor. As Gutiérrez clearly states:

There is one characteristic in particular which holds a central place: the division of humanity into oppressors and oppressed, into owners of the means of production and those dispossessed of the fruit of their work, into antagonistic social classes.³⁵

The instrument does not provide the way of looking at other possible sources of poverty and underdevelopment. Would the conquest and the development of Latin American civilization have anything to do with present conditions? It would seem proper to at least raise the question as to why Latin America is in such deplorable economic state after five centuries of almost uncontested Roman Catholic domination.³⁶

Liberation theologians tend to identify poverty *only* with material poverty, to the neglect of the richer Biblical concept of the poor. In the Bible the words "poor" and "poverty" point to all levels of human life, material as well as spiritual. The poor, those who will inherit the earth besides being socially oppressed and economically

destitute, are at the same time those who remain faithful to God and are so conscious of their spiritual poverty that they rely wholly on the mercy of God for their salvation. If poverty is identified with material poverty exclusively, the liberation needed is something only temporal. It becomes primarily earthly well-being. Partial, this-worldly liberation is not the salvation "which meets *all* the needs of persons because it offers them forgiveness and absolution and a new life which begins now and reaches beyond death into the life with Christ in the New Jerusalem."³⁷

At the same time, while liberation theologians do not deny that sin is essentially rebellion against God, they share the Renaissance view of man in which he was viewed not as a sinner, but as essentially a good creature who was destined to become better. Therefore, liberation theologians tend to overlook the root of sin and concentrate on its branches in the oppressive structures of society. Consequently, the good news of liberation is aimed primarily at such structural problems as injustice, poverty, and inequality. The analysis of the roots of injustice and the causes of alienation implicit in much liberation theology is so uniformly Marxist that no justice is done to the depth of the Biblical perspective of the human predicament. Sin is a state of corruption so profound, so entrenched in man's heart, that the elimination of poverty and oppression, were it possible, would not alter man's basic condition in any significant way. The alienation of man from God expressed in Genesis 3 will not be bridged by a utopian classless society while man's heart remains unchanged. The best social structures that man can devise quickly become inhuman if the sinful inclination of man's heart is not changed.

Words like "God acts in history" or "He acts in the real world" are found frequently in liberation literature. When the strategies for liberation are considered, however, liberation theologians speak of acting as though God were absent from history—everything depends on man. *Praxis* means man's involvement to change the world. The need of man's involvement in liberation *praxis* is constantly emphasized by liberation theologians. The process of liberation requires the active participation of the oppressed themselves. Gutiérrez tells us that the active participation of the oppressed in their liberation "is one of the most important themes running

through the writings of the Latin American church."³⁸ And Dussel points out that "our people in Latin America must liberate themselves, or else liberation will never come."³⁹

It is easy to understand why this theology can grow and flourish in a Roman Catholic soil, but finds no response from evangelical Christians who believe in *sola gratia* and *sola fide* as the means of true liberation. Dorothy Sölle admits that "there is a certain anti-protestant point in the thesis that salvation is liberation."⁴⁰ Segundo is more specific when he admits that

Since the time of the Reformation at least, the characterizing feature of the Catholic Church in this area is the emphasis on the *merit* of human endeavors for *gaining entrance* to the eternal kingdom of God. And this notion of merit is of the utmost importance for liberation theology.⁴¹

On the other hand, the same author continues, "the disappearance of the notion of *merit* from Protestant theology, dating from the time of the Reformation, seems to have undermined the possibility of any theology of history."⁴² Evangelical soteriology takes its stand firmly on the doctrine of justification by faith.⁴³ *Sola gracia* is the essence of Biblical salvation. Salvation is totally the work of God. There is no room for any type of pelagianism. The reduction of the Biblical message by an exclusively political reading is evident in the total absence of words such as cross, atonement, expiation, substitution, regeneration, justification, sanctification, depravity, and forgiveness from the writings of liberation theology. At the same time, other words such as conversion, sin, and evangelization are reinterpreted to the point that they bear little resemblance to their Biblical meaning. Ronald Sider, the author of *Rich Christians in An Age of Hunger*, who is clearly interested in the cause of the poor and in social justice, reacted with certain impatience to the horizontalism of liberation theology:

I must confess a deep uneasiness [about liberation theology]. . . . Is it too much to hope for a brief mention of the cross and atonement, Jesus' resurrection, or Christology, that goes beyond respectful admiration for the prophetic genius from Nazareth? Is evangelism (yes, I mean the urgent task of sharing the good news of Jesus' life, death and resurrection with the two billion who have never heard) truly irrelevant to a contemporary program of liberation?⁴⁴

Emilio Núñez finds two great consequences to liberation theology's new approach to salvation: "Emphasis is given to the universality of the salvific act of God and to the historical and earthly character of salvation."⁴⁶ In the same vein, Orlando Costas, also a Latin American theologian, concludes that "building a just, peaceful, and fraternal society is what salvation is all about" in liberation theology.⁴⁶

As we already have noticed, the particular hermeneutic of liberation theology leads to an essentially political re-reading of the Scriptures. Even the reading of the Exodus narrative portrays a liberation from political servitude. The political dimension becomes so exclusive a component, that the perspectives gleaned from the story are only those that square with the ideological presuppositions. Such reading yields many parallels that find easy correspondence with the present Latin American situation. It clearly is perceived that society in Egypt was divided into two antagonistic groups, viz., oppressors and oppressed, masters and slaves. Furthermore, God heard the cry of the poor and was concerned about their suffering.⁴⁷

In answer to the cry of the oppressed, God sided *with* them and *against* the oppressors. Violence, class struggle, and bloodshed became inevitable due to the persistent refusal of the oppressors to let them go.⁴⁸ The initial response of the Israelites to their own liberation (at first they were too alienated to listen) finds its echo in the unresponsiveness of the masses in Latin America. This is why a thorough work of *conscientization* claims first priority.⁴⁹ The egalitarian distribution of manna—to each according to his needs—suggests that a socialist society best fulfills the purposes of God. Moses and Aaron, chosen from among the oppressed became the agents of liberation. "Sent by Yahweh, Moses began the long, hard struggle for the liberation of his people," says Gutiérrez.⁵⁰ The present generation, as was true of the Jews in the wilderness, might have to die in order to ensure freedom for the next.⁵¹ Finally, the object of the Exodus, was liberation, an exclusively political act. "Latin American liberation theology has restored the Exodus to its political symbolism and has seen in Moses an authentic politician, guiding the people towards a better society," says Galilea.⁵² In today's Latin America "it is important to keep in mind that be-

yond—or rather through—the struggle against misery, injustice and exploitation the goal is the creation of a new man."⁵³

Gutiérrez's vision of a new society, so often mentioned in his writings, is that what will develop the new man is socialism. "Latin American socialism . . . will promote the advent of the new man."⁵⁴

If we pay attention to history we will be cautious in equating a Marxist-oriented society with liberation, because all empirical evidence points to the fact that Marxist societies bring no real advance in human freedom. In practice, "the new class opposes *any* type of freedoms, ostensibly for the purpose of preserving 'socialist' ownership," comments Djilas.⁵⁵ Ellul concludes that "until now, without exception, in every country where it has been applied, Marxism has given birth to the worst sort of dictatorships, to strictly totalitarian regimes."⁵⁶

Liberation theologians read the Bible with a "Marxist key" and often focus their attention on the Exodus because they see it pertinent to their concerns. However, they often strain this portion of Scripture from its overall perspective, thus badly mutilating its intent. The Exodus contains features and insights that can be missed or distorted easily unless it is viewed as an integral part of a larger story and is approached with a hermeneutic that does justice to the unity and integrity of Scripture. It is true that the Exodus story portrays Egypt as the oppressor and God as responding to the cry of the oppressed. It is true that the liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage was an act of justice. What should not be overlooked, however, is that the poor slaves were at the same time God's special people. God not only heard their groaning, but also "remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob" (Ex. 2:24). The God of the Exodus was "the God of your fathers" (Ex. 3:13). It was by virtue of the special relationship that God has with "these" slaves, the descendants of Abraham, with whom he made a covenant, that Yahweh was able to assist them in their affliction. The psalmist declares that God "has not dealt thus with any [other] nation."⁵⁷ There were doubtless other groups of people in the ancient world who shared the lot of the Hebrews and who also groaned under their burdens; but Israel found favor with God, not only because they cried in their affliction, but because of their special relationship to the Redeemer.

Furthermore, the Exodus narrative indicates that the liberation was not achieved by their efforts—it was entirely of God's doing. The part the "slaves" were to play was "Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which He will shew to you today" (Ex. 14:13). McKenzie, the noted Roman Catholic scholar, puts it this way:

The paradigmatic character of the exodus can thus be summarized: the need is desperate, and the candidate for salvation is helpless. The power of Yahweh is interposed in such a way that the persons saved need do nothing.⁵⁸

If justice is done to its context, the Exodus story hardly encourages political activism or armed rebellion to overthrow any contemporary pharaoh forcibly in order to gain freedom.

Furthermore, we must not ignore the fact that liberation from Egyptian bondage is only half of the story. For the Hebrews, escape from Egypt to a land of freedom where they could live their lives with dignity, free from the threat of oppression, was not enough. They were free from slavery that they might engage in the service of God. "Let my people go, that they may serve me" (Ex. 7:16) was the key note and constant refrain throughout the episode. From the Red Sea the cloud led the ex-slaves to Sinai, where the covenant was renewed. Yoder has observed that "liberation is *from* bondage and *for* covenant, and *what for* matters more than *what from*."⁵⁹ The Exodus had pre-requisites—being the people of the covenant—as well as post-requisites—the devotion of their lives to the service of God, reaching out to be a blessing to the nations. That is why a program of social political liberation that aims only at enabling people to live their lives free from poverty and misery, and nothing more, is not what is contemplated in the Exodus account.

Finally, the abiding symbol that comes to us from the Exodus is not a raised hand, summoning the poor masses to struggle and revolt, but rather a lamb that was slain, pointing to "the lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). It is one thing to borrow from the Bible the language and symbols of liberation. It is quite another to learn the Biblical meaning of liberation. Liberation theologians in their commendable efforts to bring liberation to the poor are severely handicapped because they are not radical enough. They do not go to the *radix*, the root of the problem.

They attempt instead to remove the leaves of poverty and oppression while the ugly roots are left untouched in the human heart. It is the transforming power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ alone that can bring about genuine liberation—freedom from guilt and slavery to sin which are the real cause of all injustice and oppression. It was Jesus himself who said "If the Son . . . shall make you free, ye will be free indeed" (John 8:36).

Endnotes

1 Liberation theology is a generic term denoting several different emphases, i.e., black, feminist, and third world theologies. But even when their emphases vary, a common concern underlies these different perspectives. Each speaks of God as being on the side of the oppressed, and the gospel as the good news of liberation from their particular kind of oppression. This paper addresses Latin American liberation theology.

2 Not new in the sense that it is totally autochthonous—because there are many influences that have facilitated and inspired its emergence (See Alan Neely, "Liberation Theology in Latin America: Antecedents and Autochthony," *Missiology: an International Review*, 6 [1978]: 343-370). But new in the sense that for the first time in the history of the continent—almost half a millennium—a theological reflection of this magnitude emerges from Latin America, where the practice had been "to borrow" from Europe or the United States.

3 Alfred T. Hennelly, *Theologies in Conflict: The challenge of Juan Luis Segundo* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), p. 23. Walbert Bühlmann observed in 1977 that "In the course of the third millennium—who knows—a church historian may compare the eastern church to the morning star, silent, glittering, ever full of hope, and the western church to the moon which after a night almost as luminous as the day, is now growing dim and the third church to the sun, newly risen on the horizon, ruling the day." *The Coming of the Third Church* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1977), p. 24.

4 It is not easy to state precisely when liberation theology began. In 1968 the Latin American bishops met at Medellín, Colombia for the Second Continental Gathering (CELAM II) to discuss "The Church in the Present-day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the [Second Vatican] Council." Even though the sounds of liberation were in the air prior to that date, it was Medellín that gave to this new approach to theology the stamp of approval and with it a momentum that it could hardly have achieved without this historical gathering. Enrique Dussel, the acknowledged historian of liberation theology sees the triumph of the Cuban revolution in 1958 as the first significant event in the process.

5 Besides events in the secular world which did not favor the socialist commitments of liberation theology, the most formidable obstacle that was encountered was no doubt the unsympathetic stand of Pope John Paul II. He was wary of the Marxist influence on liberation theology. He personally attended CELAM III, which met at Puebla, México in 1979, where he expressed some stern warnings against those theologians whom he considered too closely identified with the Marxist ideology. This culminated in the publication in 1984 of a document

prepared by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Sacred Congregation entitled "La teología de la liberación atenta contra la fe Católica" (Liberation Theology Attempts Against the Catholic Faith), and the interrogation of Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff by the curia.

6 See Atilio René Dupertuis, *Theology of Liberation. A Study in its Soteriology* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1987), a doctoral dissertation; and Emilio A. Núñez, *Theology of Liberation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985) for evaluations from an evangelical perspective. Dr. Núñez was born and reared in El Salvador. He writes from Guatemala, where he is professor of systematic and contemporary theology at Central American Theological Seminary.

7 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation. History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1973), p. 15. The Spanish edition first appeared in 1971, marking the debut of liberation theology in the international scene. This book has been translated into a dozen languages.

8 Ibid. p. 11.

9 Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1976), p. 9.

10 Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 88.

11 Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1986), p. 22. Hugo Assmann, also from Brazil, argues that "the greatest merit of liberation theology is perhaps its insistence on the historic starting point of its reflection . . . the situation of dominated (Latin) America."—*Opresión-Liberación. Desafío a los cristianos* (Montevideo, Tierra Nueva, 1971), p. 24.

12 David Tracy, *Blessed Rage of Order. The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 243. In Latin America, the term is used primarily to designate any activity aimed at political, economical, and social liberation; at the overcoming of alienation and oppression; at the creation of a new man in a new society. For a summary of the meaning of *praxis* in Marx, from whom this term is derived, see Steven G. Macke, "Praxis as the Context for Interpretation. A Study in Latin American Theology." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 24 (1978): 31-43.

13 Leonardo Boff, "La iglesia es el sacramento de liberación," *Proceso*, 118 (February 5, 1979): 11.

14 See Ricardo Pietrantonio, "La libertad cristiana y los procesos históricos de liberación." *Cuadernos de teología* (Vol. X, #1, 1989): 45.

15 Enrique Dussel, *Ethics and The Theology* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1978), p. 22.

16 Núñez, *Liberation Theology*, p. 28.

17 José Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 82. Penny Lernoux points out that Marx helped Latin Americans clarify their situation of neocolonial dependence on capitalism through knowledge of reality which is the first step in transformation of society. "The Long Path to Puebla," p. 10, in John Eagleson and Philip Scharper, eds., *Puebla and Beyond. Documentation and Commentary* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1979).

18 Ibid., p. 17. For a fuller discussion of this concept, see Dupertuis, *Liberation Theology*, pp. 20-100.

19 Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, p. 35. Assmann is more explicit when he admits, "I am a Marxist and I can't see the reality of Latin America in

any other category," Gayrand Wilmore and James Cone, eds., *Black Theology: A Documentary History: 1966-1979* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), p. 513.

20 "Statement" by Hugo Assmann in Sergio Torres and Virginia Fabela, eds., *Theology in the Americas* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1978), p. 299.

21 Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, p. 33.

22 John Eagleson, ed., *Christians and Socialism* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1975), p. 174.

23 Justo L. González and Catherine G. González, *Liberation Preaching. The Pulpit and the Oppressed* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), p. 69.

24 In recent years, liberation theologians have been paying more attention to the New Testament, and to other themes, such as exile, the kingdom of God, resurrection, and the significance of Christ's identification with the poor and the outcast. Significant in this new emphasis is Jon Sobrinos' *The Church of the Poor* that appeared in 1981. Sobrinos' emphasis is that the church of the poor in Latin America is but the resurrection of the true church of the New Testament.

25 Severino Croatto, *Liberación y libertad* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Mundo Nuevo, 1973), p. 37.

26 See Donald E. Gowan, "Wealth & Poverty in the Old Testament: The Case of the Widow, the Orphan, and the Sojourner," *Interpretation*, 41 (1987): 341-353.

27 Núñez, *Liberation Theology*, p. 150.

28 John H. Stek, "Salvation, Social Justice and Liberation in the Old Testament," *Calvin Theological Journal*, 13 (1978): 133.

29 John Goldingay, "The Man of War and the Suffering Servant." *Tyndale Bulletin* 27 (1976): 87.

30 Don Helder Camara. "What Would St. Thomas Aquinas Do if Faced with Karl Marx," *New Catholic World* (May-June, 1977): 108-113.

31 Anselm Kyongsuk Min, *Dialectic of Salvation. Issues in Theology of Liberation* (State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 10.

32 Pedro Arrupe, "Marxist Analysis by Christians," *Origins* 10 (April 16, 1981): 692.

33 Peter Hebblethwaite, "Christians and Instrumental Marxism," *The Month*, 8 (1975): 317.

34 See Standley J. Creuz, "German Scholar Faults Marxism as Liberation Theology's Basis," *Christianity Today* (May 15, 1987): 44.

35 Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, pp. 272, 273.

36 Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, a respected Argentinean educator and statesman and president of his country from 1868 to 1874, made an intriguing comparison between North American and South American civilizations: "Yankee civilization was the work of the plow and the primer; South American civilization was destroyed by the cross and the sword. They learned to work and to read, here we learned to idle and to pray."—Quoted in Leopoldo Zea, *The Latin American Mind* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), p. 82.

37 J. D. Gort, "Gospel for the Poor?" *Missiology: An International Review*, 30 (1979): 338. Emphasis in the original. The entire article on pp. 325-354 contains an excellent discussion on the Biblical meaning of "poor".

38 Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 113.

39 Enrique Dussel, *History and Theology of Liberation: A Latin American Perspective* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1976), p. 146.

40 Dorothee Sölle, "Resistance: Toward a First World Theology," *Christianity and Crisis* (July 23, 1979): 180.

41 Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, p. 131.

42 Ibid., p. 142.

43 Justification often has been depicted as entirely extrinsic, a totally forensic transaction, and the fact that the Holy Spirit also is active in justification, enabling the sinner to respond, believe, and obey has been ignored. Justification by faith often is understood to be the antithesis of salvation by works. Yet according to Scriptures, faith does not exclude works but gives rise to them.

44 Ronald Sider, "Theological Education and Liberation Theology: An Invitation to Respond" *Theological Education*, 16 (Autumn, 1979): 56.

45 Núñez, *Liberation Theology*, p. 179.

46 Orlando Costas, *The Church and It's Mission: A Shattering Critique From the Third World*. (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1974).

47 Exodus 3:7, 8.

48 The affirmation of violence is not general among liberation theologians; it is countenanced as a last resort when changes are not possible through non-violent means. For an interesting discussion about the "unjust violence" of the oppressed who feel forced to use it to achieve their liberation, see Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, pp. 108, 109.

49 The term *conscientization* "refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality."—Myra Bergman in an explanatory note to Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1970), p. 19. Miquez Bonino points out that "the mobilization for a 'popular uprising' and the *takeover of power* requires a serious and extended work of politicization of the masses, helping them to become aware of the contradictions of the system under which they suffer."—*Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*, 24 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 81.

50 Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 156.

51 Gutiérrez observes that "what Karl Marx wrote more than a hundred years ago is still valid: 'The present generation is like the Jews whom Moses led through the desert. Not only does it have to conquer a new world, it also has to perish to give room to the men who are to live in the new world.'" Ibid., p. 146.

52 Segundo Galilea, "Liberation as an Encounter with Politics and Contemplation", *Concilium*, 6 (June, 1974): 31.

53 Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 158.

54 Ibid., p. 91. A new man and a new society cannot be reached through capitalistic paths because the moving force of every type of capitalism is private profit and private ownership for profit.

55 Milovan Djilas, *The New Class. And Analysis of the Communist System* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1957), p. 65.

56 Jacques Ellul, *Jesus and Marx. From Gospel to Ideology*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), p. 13.

57 Psalm 147:19, 20. See John H. Yoder, "Exodus and Exile: The Two Faces of Liberation," *Cross Currents*, 23 (1973): 297-309. He forcefully points out that Goshen is prior to Exodus, that "peoplehood is the presupposition, not the product of Exodus."

58 John L. McKenzie, *A Theology of the Old Testament* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1974), p. 145.

59 Yoder, "Exodus and Exile," p. 304.

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A THEOLOGY OF THE SABBATH

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Introduction

Does the Sabbath play an essential role in salvation, or is the Sabbath only peripheral to salvation or perhaps, as some have claimed, even detrimental to it? Within what context does the Sabbath have its true and proper meaning? This talk adapted to a paper will attempt to develop not only the theme that the Sabbath is representative of the entire Christian experience, but that it is also an essential ingredient of initiation and maturation in the Christian life, a safeguard to Christian experience and a basis for the comprehensive unity of Christian doctrine.

Role of Doctrine in Christian Experience

In order to place the doctrine of the Sabbath in its proper context within Christianity, it will be helpful to give consideration to the broader context of which the Sabbath is a part, namely the role of doctrine in Christianity. How does doctrine relate to the central theme of Christianity, salvation through Jesus Christ which restores mankind to the relationship with God that was first broken by sin (Romans 5:8-10; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20)?

Christianity needs to be described in terms of personal knowledge rather than speculative or empirical knowledge. Christ Himself defined salvation as knowing God and Jesus Christ (John 17:3). That this knowledge of God is not to be interpreted speculatively may be determined not only from the general Hebrew context, which viewed knowledge as practical rather than theoretical, but