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Liberation, Eschatology and Politics in Latin American Liberation Theology

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LIBERATION, ESCHATOLOGY AND POLITICS
IN LATIN AMERICAN LIBERATION THEOLOGY

by

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

One readily observable fact about theology is its multiplicity of branches. It is a field of study that embraces a wide variety of interpretations and schools of thought. This diversity has emerged as a result of different emphases in interpretations, variety in education, socio-cultural backgrounds, and differing objectives behind the formulation of theological thought. It is readily reflected at the practical level by the numerous denominations within Christendom, each possessing its own theological distinctives. Diversity also manifests itself at the academic level in the numerous choices of courses available to the student desirous of studying theology. It would almost appear as if one cannot really intelligently arrive at decisions concerning those courses that should form the core of his theological reflection.

When faced with the necessity of making a choice between competing areas of theological study, a number of important factors emerge, and help to shape one's decision. There is, first of all, the desire for a broad, general knowledge of the field, a desire which finds fulfilment through survey courses designed to provide a broad overview. In the second place may stand the desire to fully understand the tenets of one's faith, in order that one may expound them correctly. The student here feels that loyalty to his denomination demands fidelity to its articles. He achieves this goal through a close study of the articles of faith of his

denomination. A third factor may be an apologetic one: the student may feel strongly motivated to speak forth in favor of his particular school of theology, and may find himself embroiled in bitter debates with opposing ideas. This person needs a thorough understanding of his own beliefs as well as those of the schools against which he attempts to speak. A fourth element is a very practical one, seeking to translate theology into the language and life of today's world. It is a factor that has significant ramifications for all of life, refusing to consign theology to dusty tomes sitting comfortably on library shelves, to heated debates among seminarians or even to shallow, popular style paperback consumer items. This factor does a number of vital things to theology.

It refuses the neat segmentation of life and thought observable in some systems. There is no necessity to isolate particular reasons for engaging in theological activity. The one comprehensive reason is thought to be adequate: it deals with life in its totality and is vital for its piercing comment on existential matters. He who would understand life studies theology.

Theology, by this approach, does not become a theoretical system, based on the speculations of yesteryear, but it becomes an existential project. If the existential enterprise were removed, it would cease to have any validity or applicability. Theology would cease to speak in a tone that demands a listening ear.

A crucial element related to the existential/historical, is the context of theology. The demand here is that theology speaks, not in the voice of a stranger, but in common, familiar tones. The demand is that theology comes clothed in the cultural garb of the hearers, that its speakers be of the same cultural understanding as the listeners, and that

the formulations mirror the context out of which it is spoken. This project, quite obviously, represents a departure from the purely theoretical and takes on an aspect of concreteness. It presents a theology that affects man in all of his particulars.

This latter element in theology is one that the theological student neglects to his own detriment. If he fails to explore the implications of theology for all of life he will wind up mouthing pious but empty religious platitudes. He thereby demonstrates that he is out of touch, both with theological and practical realities. If he recognizes the necessity of the reflection of theology upon all of life he is faced with a vast array of theologies that purport to do just this. His task, however, is considerably lightened by the context out of which he is emerging and by the demands of the context into which he will speak. He can utilize insights from the general field of theology but his main focus will be on that which directly affects him. Latin American Liberation Theology is one such option that presents itself to persons who are engaged in ministry within or reflection upon that particular context.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Latin American Liberation Theology is a contextualized theology arising out of reflection upon the historico-socio-political situation in Latin America. It is a theology which comes couched in unequivocal language, demanding a verdict. By the definition of the liberationists, no one ministering within the Latin American context can escape the necessity of casting a vote and determining his personal stance towards the movement. What must his response be? Does the movement provide an

adequate theological response to the broad issues of life? What is the validity of the project perceived as top priority? What is the time frame in which this must be accomplished? These are some of the vital questions raised by the subject. The answers provided are crucial in determining the shape of one's ministry.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The chief purpose of this paper is to provide a basic introduction to Latin American liberation theology, by way of an examination of the doctrines of liberation, eschatology and politics. The paper will also serve to demonstrate the effect of making the existential/historical situation the starting point for doing theology. Finally, it will serve as a reflection upon some positive and negative elements in Latin American liberation theology.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study is in real fact introductory. It makes no attempt to deal with every facet of Latin American liberation theology. Such aspects as are handled are not handled exhaustively. It will be quite apparent that much more could have been said on some matters.

The total framework and development of the paper are provided by the subject being studied. It was neither intended that a new system be developed, nor that a thorough-going restructuring of Latin American liberation theology should be offered. What is offered, within the framework indicated, are comments on the manner in which the movement may have erred in its formulations, as well as comments on those elements that are

commendable. The paper merely explores the result of selecting a particular context, Latin America, as the starting point of theological activity. It means that, while some hints as to an alternative system to Latin American liberation theology may be presented, no full blown program of restructuring will be offered.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Throughout the text the expression "liberation theology" will occur. Unless specified otherwise it is used in a very restricted sense, applying only to Latin American liberation theology. Since the expression does have wider application, its restricted usage throughout this paper should be noted.

METHOD AND PROCEDURE

Chapter one is introductory, providing the basic framework of the paper, indicating how it is developed. Chapter two gives a historical background to the study, tracing the roots and development of the movement, as well as some of its basic presuppositions. Chapter three discusses the subject of liberation, indicating its multifaceted nature, and the various levels of understanding embodied in the word. Chapter four deals with eschatology and discusses the various kinds of eschatology reflected in liberation theology. Chapter five deals with politics, indicating its priority in liberation theology; the use of Marxist thought; the Church's political tasks and the role of the class struggle. Chapter six presents a general summary of the findings of the study, and draws pertinent conclusions concerning the system and the logical outcomes of pursuing the path which it delineates.

Chapter 2

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND PRESUPPOSITIONS

Liberation theology is a theological movement which began in Latin America around the middle of this present century. Many of its leading representatives are Roman Catholic thinkers but the movement has not received official sanction from the Roman Catholic Church. Among the foremost Catholic writers are Hugo Assmann, Jose Porfiro Mirando, Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff, Juan Luis Segundo and Dom Helder Camara. The movement is not a purely Catholic one, however, as some protestant thinkers do espouse liberation theology. Rubem Alves, Jose Miguez Bonino and Richard Shaull are some protestant thinkers who fall into this category.

Since the development of liberation theology in Latin America a number of liberation movements have emerged elsewhere. There are liberation movements for blacks and women, among others. They all view human reality and seek to articulate the need for liberation from oppressor classes. The main separating factor between these various theologies is the context out of which they emerge. This fact is easily ascertained by a reading of James Cone's A Black Theology of Liberation¹ and Rosemary Ruether's Liberation Theology.² This context is crucial in determining

¹James Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1970).

²Rosemary Ruether, Liberation Theology (New York: Paulist Press, 1972)

the shape and the content of the theology, as will be apparent in the study of Latin American liberation theology, hereafter designated "liberation theology."

ITS ROOTS AND DEVELOPMENT

The development of liberation theology can be traced back to several seminal points, depending on how far back one desires to go. It seems acceptable to select a point in theological thinking where a significant divergence was made in viewing human reality in terms of a supremely important element in theological thinking and the formulation of Christian praxis. The present survey will provide an indication as to the roots of liberation theology and will also serve as a preview of the kind of variety embodied in that theology. It will also proceed through the theology of secularization, European political theology, developmentalism and the emergence of the language of liberation.

The Theology of Secularization

One of the theological movements which served to focus attention on the here-and-now over against the future of eternity and its spiritual realities was the theology of secularization. This movement, impressed by the numerous technological advances made by man, saw the emergence of a growing self-sufficiency which would consign religious faith to the dust heaps of obsolescence if it failed to concretize itself and speak the language of modern man. It was essential that theology mature, thereby keeping pace with man who had reached the full bloom of adulthood. Antonio Perez-Esclarin, a Venezuelan priest and liberation theologian, sees Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John Robinson, Harvey Cox and Gabriel Vahanian as leading representatives of the theology of secularization. He defines

secularization as

. . . taking cognizance of our duties and obligations toward this world and this life here. It is abandoning an alienating obsession with some world beyond or some hereafter. Thanks to the progress of science, people now realize that the course of history is in their own hands.³

The theology of secularization demanded, in many cases, a radical alteration of thinking as well as of lifestyle. One could not be overly concerned about an unknown and uncertain future. The necessity to fulfill present and pressing obligations made it imperative that one concentrate on tackling those matters which directly affected present life.

Liberation theology demonstrates its relationship to secularization by its definite fixation on present realities. One strand sees this fixation as a necessary stance in view of the eschatological hope concerning the future. Another strand sees it as the only approach, in view of a present eschatological situation that will not be delayed. For both views, history is not a process controlled from outside by an unknown force. Man, having attained full adulthood, is the master of his fate, the sole shaper of his destiny. Secularization maintains that man must assume his rightful role of dominance over the flow of events in the human arena.

While secularization did produce changes in man's outlook, it failed to bring him to the point of understanding and committing himself to the project of liberation. Perez-Esclarin indicates a two-fold failure: a) it spoke of transformation but fell far short of the articulation of the indispensable revolutionary nature of the change that was necessary, and b) it said nothing of the necessary political involvement of those in

³Antonio Perez-Esclarin, Atheism and Liberation (New York: Orbis Books, 1978), pp. 99-100.

the faith.⁴ In the face of this failure, the theology of secularization did not prove to be the motivating force that it could have been. There was need for an even greater articulation, a need partially met in European political theology.

European Political Theology

Jurgen Moltmann and J. B. Metz became leading representatives of European political theology. This movement recognized the fact that there were underlying problems in society and sought to point these out. The method pursued would have to "avoid new forms of theological support for the existing power structures."⁵ European political theology deliberately set out to be in opposition to the status quo and to point to the necessity for developing another type of system better suited to man's political needs.

If there is debate concerning any of the roots of liberation theology, it is undeniable that it has some affinity to Jurgen Moltmann's theology of hope. They are described as being "one and the same in foundation,"⁶ although they are not identical. This theology of hope was essentially forward looking, assuring the believer that, even in the midst of his present situation of seeming hopelessness and despair, the future held the promise of better things, vouchsafed by the resurrection of Christ. All of history was moving toward this most significant of all events. This message of hope, of a future liberation, was a very

⁴Ibid., p. 104.

⁵Hugo Assmann, Theology for a Nomad Church (New York: Orbis Books, 1976), p. 30.

⁶Kenneth Hamilton, "Liberation Theology: An Overview," Evangelicals and Liberation, ed. Carl E. Armerding (New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), p. 4.

significant strain in the theology of hope, but it fell short by being too futuristic, by failing to produce a pragmatic plan of action for the present, and by seeming to foster a quiescent acceptance of the status quo. It was largely deficient because, in its address to the poor and oppressed, it did not show how to be freed from those dehumanizing factors that created the oppression. It asked these people to delay their all too pressing and obvious needs for some future time when the assured parousia would come. The parousia would bring with it the freedom from these negative elements. In the face of this expectation, people could bear the present situation with tranquility.⁷

The idea of bearing with the status quo is repugnant to liberation theology. Sufferers must be made to realize that their freedom can be brought about in this life, and every effort must be expended in this direction. The theology of hope and any other system that projects liberation into the future is deficient and unacceptable to liberationists. The present situation must be addressed now and in practical terms. Metz approached this ideal much more closely than Moltmann.

The major thrust of Metz's work was to show the implications of eschatology for political life and action. He drew the implication that it was necessary for the church to be involved in the now, analysing society. The church has a political role to play. Gustavo Gutierrez, a leading spokesman for liberation theology, gives political theology very high marks for its recognition of the political aspect of the faith and for its original thinking on the question of the role of the church

⁷Perez-Esclarin, Ibid., p. 105.

in today's world.⁸

As with so many other systems, however, political did not quite meet with the aspirations of those who were desirous of forging a dynamic theology of liberation. Latin American theologians recognized its shortcomings and did not accept it as the way to deal with their historic reality. Hugo Assmann, one of the more radical representatives of the movement, criticizes political theology, claiming that Metz erred in distinguishing between political ethics and political theology. By this move political theology ceased to have the practical impact that it could have had. Assmann also criticizes European theologians for not taking sufficient cognizance of Marxist thought on the matter of theory and practice.⁹ There is a marked difference between the two theologies in the matter of the primacy of politics. European political theology sees politics as being "also" important, while liberation theology sees it as being of primary importance¹⁰

Perhaps the major criticism of European political theology is that offered by Gutierrez. For him the distance of the European theologian from the concrete situation of oppression severely limits his ability to deal with the issue. He says that the European political theologian

. . . cannot penetrate the situation of dependency, injustice and exploitation in which most of mankind finds itself. His conception of the political sphere lacks what could be acquired both by the experience of confrontations and conflicts stemming from the rejection of this oppression of some men by others and

⁸Gustavo Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation (New York: Orbis Books, 1973), pp. 220-225.

⁹Assmann, *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 94.

of some countries by others, as well as by the experience of the aspiration to liberation which emerges from the heart of these conditions.¹¹

The central idea here is that if the theology is to be effective in a given context, it must speak forth from that context and be informed by the context. The starting point for theology must be the concrete existential situation of the speaker. While the theology of secularization and political theology did attempt to address the contemporary situation it was not the situation of oppression prevalent in Latin America. These two movements served the purpose of introducing ideas that have been of some significance in the development of liberation theology. They failed, however, to bring the idea of liberation as far as liberationists thought necessary. Liberation theology sought to make up the deficiencies in these systems and also in that economic system which initially promised much to the oppressed : developmentalism. The reaction against this theory was to prove one of the strongest motivating factors to the formulation and articulation of liberation theology.

Developmentalism

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), has been dealing with the necessity to restructure the terms of trade between poor countries and developed countries. Four meetings - Geneva (1964), New Delhi (1968), Santiago (1972) and Nairobi (1976), dealt with this complex issue. The 1968 meeting proposed that the developed nations give one per cent of gross national product to development aid

¹¹Gutierrez, Ibid., p. 224.

for the poorer countries.¹² The hope was that this would be a significant means of bringing about economic growth and positive social change in these countries. Progress would be the order of the day, and the living standard would rise in these countries, producing the greatest good for their inhabitants.

The proposal met with approval from the beneficiary nations. There was a sense of gratitude that their plight was being recognized and that something positive was being done to alleviate it. This approval and gratitude did not last, however, as the shape of developmentalism began to emerge. The overwhelming verdict was that developmentalism had been a misnomer, since progress in these countries was not what had been anticipated. Indeed, the recipient nations were soon to discover that the cost was great, in terms of self-determination and continued independence, as the following items will indicate.

Any private investment flowing from a developed country had as its key impetus the promise of the greatest return in the shortest period of time. Very little, if any, consideration was given to doing the greatest good for the receiving country. That the investor was meeting a felt need in the country was significant to him only to the extent that he could exploit this need and so feed his desire for quick profits. Since the idea behind investment is that the investor will recoup his investment and gain an excess, it is obvious that there is an automatic export of money from the receiving nation, with more flowing out than what came in.¹³

¹²Pierre Bigo, The Church and Third World Revolution. (New York: Orbis Books, 1977), pp. 32, 257.

¹³Rene Laurentin, Liberation, Development and Salvation (New York: Orbis Books, 1972), pp.viii, ix.

Clearly, this route would not provide the kind of development desired by the underdeveloped nations. It was benefitting the investors, but not the recipients. As Pierre Bigo points out:

Placing obstacles in the way of such efforts is exactly how structures of dependence restrain expansion, as privileged classes and nations do when, instead of making the economy of the young nations productive by their investments, they exploit them for their own profits; whether they squander their profits or invest them in their own country, they do not create employment, which could provide jobs for an overabundant labor force. With jobs unavailable, people can neither work nor save.¹⁴

If the investor placed factories in the underdeveloped nations, these could produce finished goods and benefit from the price of these goods. Instead the basic raw materials are extracted and the country receives a small return. The goods are finished in the developed countries and sold to the developing countries at a vast profit.

Arthur Simon, Executive Director of the United States based group "Bread for the World" indicates that the imbalances flowing out of investment policies are clearly demonstrated in Latin America. He cites figures indicating that in 1970 United States corporations had control or influence over between seventy to ninety percent of raw materials in Latin America, and over half of its foreign trade, banking and manufacturing industry and public utilities. He states quite revealingly:

Another cause for alarm in Latin America is growing U. S. dominance in the communications media, which often promote consumer tastes that militate against development needs. You can understand the feeling of people in many poor countries that they are being swallowed up.¹⁵

¹⁴Bigo, *ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁵Arthur Simon, Bread for the World (New York: Paulist Press, 1975), p. 104.

Simon also points out that the developing countries often feel it necessary to offer lavish inducements to foreign investors, but fail to get the return that they had anticipated.

Desperate to provide jobs and opportunities to their people, but lacking the capital and management skills to develop modern industries, those countries may have to attract foreign companies by offering generous inducements, such as low interest loans, overvalued exchange rates or lavish tax concessions. Sometimes those industries provide relatively few jobs for the capital invested, but host countries may feel that a few jobs are better than none or be lured by the hope - often disappointed - of earning more foreign exchange.¹⁶

Where the investment came by way of loans rather than investment, the borrower is saddled with the necessity of paying back both the principal and interest. Hence the country is forced to find even more than what it could not find at the time it had to contract for the loan. The excess of interest over principal again makes the borrowing nation a net exporter of foreign currency, a role it can ill afford to play.

Another element contributing to loss of freedom by the recipient nations is the insistence by the donors that bilateral agreements be concluded, rather than routing the aid through international agencies set up for that purpose. This action leaves the donors with a free hand to impose terms which can only work in its favor. These terms have included the purchasing of goods from the country providing the loan (even if the same goods are available elsewhere at better prices).¹⁷

Developmentalism sought to further entrench the hold of governments which dominate the world economy. It did not attempt any radical restructuring to favor poor countries, as it did not desire to upset the interests of the ruling countries.¹⁸ Another option had to be

¹⁶Ibid., p. 105.

¹⁷Bigo, *ibid.*, pp. 32,33

¹⁸Gutierrez, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

created - an option that was closer to the needs of the moment.

The radical critique of developmentalism which led to its rejection saw as its end result the emergence of the language of liberation. The ferment created by the critique, and the feelings that arose out of it led to the seeking after a resolution of the crisis brought about by the failure of developmentalism. The break with developmentalism was inevitable because developmentalism failed to get at the roots of the problems existing in underdeveloped nations.

Development must attack the root causes of the problems and among them the deepest is economic, social, political and cultural dependence of some countries upon others - an expression of the domination of some social classes over others. Attempts to bring about changes within the existing order have proven futile. This analysis of the situation is at the level of scientific rationality. Only a radical break with the status quo, that is, a profound transformation of the private property system, access to power and a social revolution that would break this dependence would allow for the change to a new society, a socialist society - or at least allow that such a society might be possible.¹⁹

The option to developmentalism would not merely involve a reformation or a reworking of that system. It would involve a radical break, a totally new orientation. This break would not embrace a capitalist option. It would not be the development of a totally new idea in the political world, but would be none other than the socialist option. Here an indication is given of the inner workings of the option to developmentalism. It must be noted that while the movement begins with the analysis of the situation in Latin America, it also makes the presupposition that the only solution is a socialist one. Socialism, of course, did not originate in Latin America.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 27.

The necessity for radical change also calls for a change of language, so that the new reality is more adequately expressed. This is the idea conveyed by Gutierrez, for whom the new language is more appropriate and comes closer to expressing the richness in content embraced by the new movement.

In this light, to speak about the process of liberation begins to appear more appropriate and richer in human content. Liberation in fact expresses the inescapable moment of radical change which is foreign to the ordinary use of the term development. Only in the context of such a process can a policy of development be effectively implemented, have any real meaning, and avoid misleading formulations.²⁰

It may be gathered from the above that all that is necessary is that there be a change in terminology. This original impression ought not to cloud what is essentially true of the movement : it is not only a change in terminology that is being sought after. In fact, if one looks keenly enough at the above remarks by Gutierrez it will become apparent that a new, radical reality is actually being mooted. There is not only a rebellion against the usual use of the term development. There is also a revulsion against its usual meaning and its usual connotations. Introduce a new word, a new concept, a new reality, and the past associations, the past imbalances, the past problems, will be removed.

The mere substitution of terminology could never deal adequately with the problems existing in the Latin American context. Laurentin is correct in insisting on the necessity for real, viable alternatives. It is never enough to just parrot a word, however popular the word. It is essential that a positive program be devised to inaugurate the new

²⁰Ibid..

reality. He says:

Moreover, the word "liberation," which is used so frenetically and ambiguously today, is also threatened with the devaluation attendant on other misuses of language. If liberation is used as a drawing room slogan or as the by-word of an armchair theologian, like development it becomes a havoc. It gives the illusion that the word itself is enough to destroy the systems and forces of oppression in order to solve the problem. What has to be done, actually, is to construct and invent better forms. Furthermore, "liberation" without any viable development project would merely reinforce the established order. The worst kinds of dictatorship have a good cause for claiming to be guarantors of order when faced with actions that are impotent and chaotic.²¹

The use of the word "liberation" without prior serious analysis and a well thought out political policy would be dysfunctional. Without a clear program of action there would be inadequate motivation. The central core of cohesiveness would be missing, and the movement would become fractured and disarrayed.

The factors which impelled the emergence of the language of liberation and the strictures against using this language as a magical panacea have been discussed. It is left now to indicate how the language actually did emerge, in a specific historical context. There were two streams of development, the one Roman Catholic and the other Protestant.

Roman Catholic Response: CELAM

Hugo Assmann traces the development of the use of the language of liberation in three stages. The first antedates 1965, when its appearance was rare and its meaning ill-defined. In the documents of the church the sole word used was "development." The second stage came after 1965 with

²¹Laurentin, *ibid.*, p. xiii.

numerous appearances of the word in unofficial documents. This increase in the use of the language of liberation led to a corresponding lessening in the currency of the language of development. The third stage, the stage of full official recognition and usage, was inaugurated by the Medellin Conference of Catholic Bishops, CELAM II, held at Medellin, Colombia, in 1968.²²

CELAM II was an important watershed in the life of the Latin American Roman Catholic Church. In the years preceding this conference, including CELAM I, held in 1955 in Brazil, the church had a stance that was very strongly pro-establishment. Indeed, the church owed much to the support of the political hierarchy, even having some of its functionaries appointed by the rulers. The church felt that any improvement in the lot of its parishioners could only flow from its good relationship to the hierarchy. Thus the church made no attempts to upset the status quo. With CELAM II the situation was changed quite drastically. The Medellin Conference adopted the radical language of liberation theology. From that point on a number of priests in the Catholic Church in Latin America embarked upon a radical commitment to preaching and working for liberation.

The next phase in the history of the movement came at CELAM III, held in Puebla, Mexico in January, 1979. The meeting was considered of such importance as to necessitate the visit of the newly inaugurated Pope, John Paul II. The leaders of the radical wing in the church did not get much support from the Pope, who condemned the priest's involvement in

²²Assmann, *ibid.*, p. 46.

radical political activity, and called the priests to a recognition of their spiritual roles. Political activity, he indicated, should be left to the laity. He indicated that true liberation comes about through God's truth, and declared that primacy should be given to the moral and spiritual "to what springs from the full truth concerning man."²³ The speech did not receive a ready acceptance from the progressive wing, which found it "unsatisfactory."²⁴

The official document coming out of CELAM III reflects upon the oppression in Latin America but puts some distance between the official church and the activities of the progressive wing. It neither supports capitalism nor Marxism, but is critical of "governments judged to be oppressive."²⁵ Love must be the central motivating element behind all activity. The document declared:

At the same time, the Spirit of love rejects all methods, means and strategies of social change that are based in hatred, in the systematic exclusion of any sector of society, in the judgment and condemnation without mercy or forgiveness, in the acceptance of violence as a necessary and legitimate means of social change.²⁶

Thus the movement did not get sweeping approval at CELAM III. However, the liberation theologians have not altered their commitment to the radical project of liberation.

The route travelled in Protestant ranks was somewhat different, but the end result was the same: a radical commitment to liberation.

²³National Catholic Register, Supplement, Los Angeles, February 11, 1979, p. vi.

²⁴Time, February 12, 1979, p. 69.

²⁵National Catholic Register, February 11, 1979, p. 1.

²⁶Ibid., p. 9.

Protestant Response: ISAL

The Protestant response to the situation in Latin America was seen in ISAL - Church and Society in Latin America (Iglesia y Sociedad en la America Latina). Earliest aspects of development are traceable to the 1940's in various youth movements - the MEC (Christian Student Movement), and the ULAJE (Latin American Unity of Evangelical Youth). ISAL emerged out of these movements and held consultations in Peru in 1961, in Switzerland in 1966, in Chile in 1966, Uruguay in 1967 and in Peru in 1971.²⁷

ISAL analyses underdevelopment and its causes, focusing on the various types of "dependences which afflict Latins today: political, cultural, technological, military." ²⁸ A key to breaking the dependence is the conscientization of the oppressed, and a liberation which creates a classless society. ISAL accepts a Marxist analysis of society and holds that cooperation with Marxists may be necessary to bring about liberation.²⁹

Major protestant thinkers who have contributed to the theology of liberation are: Rubem Alves, Jose Miguez Bonino and Richard Shaull.

The discussion now turns to some general presuppositions of the movement.

²⁷Emilio A. Nunez, "The Theology of Liberation" Bibliothecae sacrae 134:536, 1977, p. 344.

²⁸Ibid., p. 345.

²⁹Ibid.

SOME PRESUPPOSITIONS

This examination of the presuppositions of liberation theology will unearth some very interesting factors. The primary interest in these factors will emerge when one recognizes that they are foundational concepts which have served to shape the movement. It is because the movement begins with these presuppositions that it cannot be other than it in fact reveals itself to be.

Theology Must Reflect Historical Reality

It seemed quite apparent to Latin American theologians that the old theologies articulated in Europe did not quite fit into the Latin American scene. Their patterns of thinking, socio-economic realities and goals had no practical relevance to the Latin American situation. European theology grew up in a different political and cultural milieu. Its interests are vastly different from those of Latin America, and it does not provide a window on Latin American society. Enrique Dussell illustrates the divergence in outlook by indicating that, while Europeans ponder how to eat less, the Latin American must try to determine how to get enough food to eat.³⁰ European theology does not major in reflection on the Latin American scene, and its continued wholesale acceptance by Latin American theologians would reflect a continuing state of theological infancy.

A key motivating factor was the view that an adult church is expected to articulate its own theology. Liberation theology states that Latin America could not continue to follow a direction formulated elsewhere and imposed from outside. It was not tolerable that Latin

³⁰Enrique Dussell, History and the Theology of Liberation. (New York: Orbis Books, 1976), p. 30.

America should continue to borrow and ape a theology that was developed in and patterned after the European cultural situation.

Only recently have we turned our attention back to our own real life here, discovering a history that has lain buried in obscurity since the sixteenth century. Once again theology has become a real possibility in Latin America, and that in itself is cause for rejoicing.³¹

The rejection of European theology is not based upon anything quite approaching a failure to accord with scriptural data. It does not center upon any rejection of or departure from orthodox teaching. European theology is rejected on the basis that it does not reflect a uniquely Latin American heritage and it is not a commentary on contemporary Latin American society. The proposed solution is a return to and a reflection upon the history and the current situation in Latin America. Liberation theology seeks to address a particular context and uses that context as its starting point.

Liberation theologians hope that the shift of focus from European to a uniquely Latin American theology will not only be indicative of the church's march to adulthood, but will also be the means of gaining the attention of Europe. No attention will be forthcoming until the Latin American church reflects upon and articulates her own theology. She cannot continue to repeat categories and formulations borrowed from another culture.³²

The cry for contextualization of theology is a logical and necessary one. Theology ceases to serve its intended function when it

³¹Ibid., pp. 29,30.

³²Ibid., p. 31.

imposes alien thought forms upon a captive audience. Since theological textbooks have been written in Europe and since missionaries have been the product of a European type of theological education, there has been some export of this theology to the underdeveloped countries. This has been evident in some patterns of worship, and what is often considered acceptable dress. It is also evident in some of the philosophical categories and formulations employed. Clearly, wholesale acceptance of European theology is not acceptable. This continues the dependence of the Latin American church on others, and restricts its ability to develop its own theological reflection.

To say all of this is not to agree with liberation theology that it is necessary to knock the whole theological house down and begin a new project from the foundation. It is not to agree that it is necessary to introduce an entirely new system of thought that does not necessarily agree with the thinking of the church universal. There are elements which are basic, which center in the revealed Word of God, and which must be central to all theologies. Where this central core of Christian truth is absent or where there is a great divergence from it, one wonders at the validity of calling the system Christian. Divergence, however, does not scare the liberation theologians, as is reflected in the words of Assmann who states:

Once set on this path, the Latin American theologian is still going to find himself alone, almost devoid of links with the Christian reference-points of the past, both on the level of essential doctrine, and on that of the historical forms taken by the institutions charged with mediating that doctrine in history. He is a conscious "apostate" from the idealism of the past and those that are arising again today. Like any apostate rebelling iconoclastically against idols of the past, he finds it difficult - for linguistic and other reasons - to

make his brothers understand that he is not just an iconoclast but an opener of new horizons on the use of the name of God.³³

Note should be taken of the fact that Assmann is not really afraid of such divergences as may occur. He goes as far as to indicate that there is a great deal of consciousness in the measure of divergence, and that there is no real attempt to stem this divergence. The idea of integration is not crucial to the movement, which is not afraid of standing alone, over against the witness of the rest of the church.

Theological divergence does not come by accident, but is a necessary corollary of the starting point and the tools employed by the movement. It begins at a point radically different from that of other theologies, and it allows for the employment of other tools than those employed by other theologies. The starting point is the existential situation in Latin America. Among the tools employed by the movement, the social sciences take pride of place.

The Use of the Social Sciences

Hugo Assmann indicates that the use of sociological, historical and political tools and language for the analysis of reality has resulted in the question as to the validity of calling liberation theology by the name "theology." If these secular sciences are conducting the analysis and if theology is being judged by their standards, how can it be maintained that the project is theological? Assmann proposes as an answer the fact that there is a constant attempt to find "the presence of the Christian faith in historical experience." This constant reference

³³ Assmann, *ibid.*, pp. 124-125. ³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 62.

to the Christian faith is what makes the task theological and justifies the use of the word "theology." The truth of the biblical message, of theological criteria, only becomes clear as explicated by the social sciences.³⁴ Hence the tools of sociological analysis must be employed.

At this point the liberationists are doing something quite interesting with theology. Not only is there a great deal of interest generated by this aspect of the movement, but there must be the recognition that it does represent a radical departure from the usual way of doing theology. It reduces the theological enterprise to a purely subjective endeavor, in which the criteria are subjectively determined. Theology does not now find its standards, its points of judgment, in the revelation given by God, but rather in the reading back into reflection, sociological reflection at that, of a nebulous attempt at locating Christian faith in the existential situation. By this departure anyone can advance the claim to be doing theology, as long as he states that he is using this subjective standard. The door is now open for the introduction of anything, any idea, as long as it fits into the social sciences and into this very broad, undefined and subjectively determined idea of Christian experience. There is not a tremendous tension which points in the direction of the necessity of retaining an orthodox stance in theology. There is greater desire to be involved in a system that produces action, rather than one which fits into a right system of doctrine.

³⁵Ibid., p. 64.

Orthopraxis Over Orthodoxy

It is felt by liberation theologians that the church has failed to articulate ethical guidelines for practical action. This failure has led many people to leave the church because they failed to see how the faith translates into daily thinking and activity. They feel that there is excessive concentration on correct, systematic doctrinal formulation - right thinking over right action. In Christ and the early church, they insist, the situation was quite different. There a greater emphasis was put on action, rather than on correct thinking.

We know nevertheless that for Christ and for the primitive Church the essential did not consist in the reduction of the message of Christ to systematic categories of intellectual comprehension but in creating new habits of acting and living in the world. This praxiological moment of the message of Christ is especially perceptive in Latin American theological reflection.³⁶

In the discussion that follows, the practical outworking of this viewpoint will be apparent, in the matter of political activity. It is well to note, however, that if actions are to be adjudged correct, they must be informed by the teaching of Scripture and must be in accord with them. It is difficult to conceive of right action that does not spring from orthodoxy. Interestingly, the movement passes over in silence the witness of the New Testament epistles that right thinking was very vital in the early church.

At the same time, it must be recognized that the movement from orthodoxy to orthopraxis is not a natural one. It does not follow that the person who has right doctrine will automatically proceed to right action. Too great a gulf is often fixed between them. It is necessary

³⁶Leonardo Boff, Jesus Christ Liberator. (New York: Orbis Books, 1978), p. 47.

to bring orthodoxy and orthopraxis into proper balance. Orlando Costas, an evangelical, is correct in his call for greater speaking on the matter of orthopraxis:

It is time we evangelicals start sounding off on the imperative of orthopraxis, instead of spending all our time defending right doctrine. Orthodoxy is no guarantee of orthopraxis, as Jacob Spener and the Pietist movement taught us. It is not even a guarantee of missionary zeal. The latter comes only from serious, loving all out commitment to God and man.³⁷

Our word, no matter how correct, becomes vain and empty if it fails to address itself to the current human situation. If it merely creates an ivory tower of isolation from the real, practical issues of life, it is an evil.

CONCLUSION

This, then, is the path by which liberation theology has come into existence. These are some of its component facets. This presents a new and quite interesting development in contemporary theological thought. It has vital implications for Christian activity in today's world. The following chapters will explore the issues of liberation, eschatology and politics, with a view to understanding more about the content of this system.

³⁷Orlando Costas, The Church and its Mission (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1974), p. 247.

Chapter 3

LIBERATION

"liberation" in liberation theology, is not a simple idea that can be adequately described in a word or sentence. It is a multifaceted idea that has a number of significant emphases and ramifications, as will be indicated in our study. A correct picture can only be arrived at as a result of the bringing together of the various elements.

BOFF: TWO LEVELS

One approach to the question gives a simple, two-fold answer. In this view Leonardo Boff, a Brazilian priest and liberation theologian, whose work Jesus Christ Liberator develops Christology on liberationist lines, points out that there are two essential demands that must be met if man is to achieve liberation. On the one hand there is the necessity of personal conversion and on the other a transformation of society.¹ This view does have balance, recognizing the two vital components, the first being the foundation upon which all praxis must be built, and the second the praxis itself, an outcome of the inner transformation.

There is no ambiguity in Boff's description of conversion. Conversion comes through activity taking place inside the individual, based on the individual's own initiative and activity, as he is aided by

¹Leonardo Boff, Jesus Christ Liberator. (New York: Orbis Books, 1978), p. 64.

God, since man can do nothing on his own. It involves a change of one's thinking and action. This man now pleases God, having gone through an inner revolution.² Boff does not, however, clearly articulate the path to this inner revolution. This is left unclear and undefined.

The social dimension is also important as a necessary corollary to the personal. If the implications of conversion are to be lived to the fullest, man must fulfill the social mandate.

The preaching of Jesus Christ about the kingdom of God concerns not only persons, demanding conversion of them. It also affects the world of persons in terms of a liberation from legalism, from conversions without foundation, from authoritarianism and the forces and powers that subject people.³

The kind of liberation here described by Boff is one that has at least two aspects. It is described in such language as to suggest that this is not an essentially new view of life. Certainly most persons would feel committed to freeing man from legalism, authoritarianism and the other factors mentioned by Boff. This simplified view of liberation, however, is not all that there is to the subject. As the preface to Boff's work indicates, much more could have been said, but the political restrictions in force at the time did not permit it. We must turn to Gustavo Gutierrez, whose treatment is fuller and more representative. Gutierrez is recognized as one of the leading spokesmen for liberation theology.

GUTIERREZ: THREE LEVELS OF MEANING

When we turn to Gustavo Gutierrez, we find a more detailed

²Ibid,

³Ibid., p. 72.

description of the task of liberation. The immediate impression is that we are not, in the first instance, dealing with a spiritual reality that also has social implications. It seems apparent that liberation is a complex reality that has spiritual, historical, political and other facets, with no necessary weight given to any aspect. Gutierrez describes the task of liberation theology as follows:

The theology of liberation attempts to reflect on the experience and meaning of the faith based on the commitment to abolish injustice and to build a new society; this theology must be verified by the practice of that commitment, by active, effective participation in the struggle which the exploited social classes have undertaken against their oppressors. Liberation from every form of exploitation, the possibility of a more human and more dignified life, the creation of a new man - all pass through this struggle.⁴

If this definition of the task of liberation is accepted, one would be led to believe that the only task which engages it is the task of liberating the oppressed from those factors of injustice and oppression that rob them of full personhood. One would gather that the new man is created through this struggle and that the sum total of the new man is that he be liberated in this sense. While this view would not reflect the full reality of the movement, it is yet correct in isolating this aspect as one of its leading tenets. If, indeed, one is justified in holding that this is a crucial factor and if it jars against one's traditional understanding of the task of the church, it is necessary to understand that liberation theology sets out with this very purpose in mind, that of jolting man's consciousness. Hugo Assmann describes this task as follows:

⁴Gutierrez, *ibid.*, p. 307.

In common Christian usage, the introduction of the term "liberation" implies a dislocation of the semantic axis of the word "liberty." This is of paramount importance, because it is a concrete example of the ideological and semantic domination and imprisonment of our language. Even progressive European theology is still full of talk about "liberty", but totally neglects the term "liberation"; this is probably the fault of our translations of the Bible. The historic mentality of Judaeo-Christianity, in contrast to the cosmic fixity of Greek thought, was one of process, practice and change; but how does one insist on that if the terms used in biblical translations are abstract, a-historical, postulating terms, and not situational or process words - words that explicate practice? This is the significance of the Latin-American theological attempt to regain the historical and dynamic force of the biblical vocabulary by using the word "liberation."⁵

There, then, is a clear explication of the approach - the language will definitely express new realities, and will challenge the traditional understandings of old realities. This is the case with liberation, and it is demonstrated in the approach utilized by Gutierrez.

For Gutierrez there are three levels of approaches, the first being the level of economic liberation, the second that of social liberation, and the third that of faith. While this ordering as well as the components of each item may lead to the conclusion that there are strong biases favoring one over the others, it should be borne in mind that Gutierrez disavows any such intent. He indicates that he is describing, not three parallel or successive processes, but rather one single process, with three levels.

This is not a matter of three parallel or chronologically successive processes, however. These are three levels of meaning of a single, complex process, which finds its deepest sense and its full realization in the saving work of Christ. These levels

⁵Assmann, *ibid.*, p. 47.

of meaning, therefore, are interdependent. A comprehensive view of the matter presupposes that all three aspects can be considered together. In this way two pitfalls will be avoided: first idealist or spiritualist approaches, which are nothing but ways of evading a harsh and demanding reality, and second, shallow analyses and programs of short-term effect initiated under the pretext of meeting immediate needs.⁶

As the treatment of these three levels of meaning is examined, these questions must be borne in mind: Does Gutierrez come through as describing one reality, and if so, what is the reality described?

The level of economic liberation deals with

. . . the aspirations of oppressed peoples and social classes, emphasizing the conflictual aspect of the economic, social, and political process which puts them at odds with wealthy nations and oppressive classes.⁷

This viewpoint rejects the development option as providing an untrue picture, failing to underth essential realities of the socio-economic situation. It recognizes the necessity of providing for individual countries the means whereby they may become liberated from the nations that control the economic purse strings. It provides the means whereby these countries can chart their own course and determine their own future. It also involves the economic freedom of classes within a country, whereby they are freed from the yoke of economic oppression.

The level of social liberation deals with man in history, making himself. It involves the recognition by man that he is indeed able to chart his own destiny and it involves his taking this course of action. It involves freedom, leading to the new man, and concomitantly, a new society. In this man assumes "conscious responsibility for his own

⁶Gutierrez, *ibid.*, p. 37 ⁷*Ibid.*, p. 36.

destiny,"⁸ and "makes himself throughout his life and throughout history."⁹ The influence of the theology of secularization is here apparent. Man has now come of age and is lord over history. This level is described by Perez-Esclarin as

. . . a process of liberation in which people gradually grow to maturity, accept their destiny and their vocation to be active subjects, and fashion a form of real, creative liberty in history.¹⁰

The level of faith involves the full recognition of Christ as the liberator from sin, thus restoring friendship and eliminating injustice and oppression.¹¹ Gutierrez states:

. . . the word liberation allows for another approach leading to the Biblical sources which inspire the presence and action of man in history. In the Bible, Christ is represented as the one who brings us liberation. Christ the Savior liberates man from sin, which is the ultimate root of all disruption of friendship and of all injustice and oppression. Christ makes man truly free, that is to say, he enables man to live in communion with him; and this is the basis for all human brotherhood.¹²

The liberation from sin is described as being truly crucial, because sin is "the ultimate root of all injustice, all exploitation, all dissidence among men."¹³ At this point it must be indicated that this particular conception of the all pervading and damaging nature of sin would seem to give this level of liberation some weight over the other levels. Indeed it does appear to be a crucial consideration, without which the other levels would not be able to stand.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Perez-Esclarin, *ibid.*, p. 110. ¹¹Gutierrez, *ibid.*, p. 37.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., p. 237.

The above response equates liberation with a spiritual vision or activity, and places the other elements after the fulfillment of this dimension of faith. Only after this liberation from sin can the other two elements come to fruition. By this liberation would become a spiritual endeavor, with social and economic implications. Gutierrez is careful to state, however, that such an interpretation would not be in keeping with what he is proposing.

Nothing escapes this process, nothing is outside the pale of the action of Christ and the gift of the Spirit. This gives human history its profound unity. Those who reduce the work of salvation are indeed those who limit it to the strictly "religious" sphere and are not aware of the universality of the process. It is those who think that the work of Christ touches the social order in which we live only indirectly or tangentially, and not in its roots and basic structure. It is those who in order to protect salvation (or to protect their interests) lift salvation from the midst of history, where men and social classes struggle to liberate themselves from the slavery and oppression to which other men and social classes have subjected them. It is those who refuse to see that the salvation of Christ is a radical liberation from all misery, all despoliation, all alienation. It is those who by trying to "save" the work of Christ will "lose it."¹⁴

He says elsewhere:

The theology of liberation is a theology of salvation incarnated in the concrete historical and political conditions of today. Those historical and political mediations of today, valued in themselves, change the life experience and pattern, as well as, the reflection on the mystery hidden from old and revealed now, the love of the father and human fraternity, and the operating salvation in time, all of which give a deep unity to human history. We do not give two histories, one by which we become children of God and the other by which we become each other's brothers. This is what the term liberation wants to make present and underline.¹⁵

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 179.

¹⁵Gustavo Gutierrez, "Freedom and Liberation," Liberation and Change, ed. Ronald H. Stone. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), p. 86.

Gutierrez is bringing us back to his original affirmation: it is not three separate realities, but one reality with three levels of meaning. There is no movement from the liberation from sin to the other types of liberation in the sense that they are separate realities that may not be achieved without affecting liberation. For Gutierrez liberation involves such an intricate intertwining of these factors that it cannot be called liberation if it does not involve all of them. Note should be taken of his strictures against confining this matter to the "strictly religious" realm. It is an all-embracing reality.

The program offered by the liberationists is an ambitious one, which takes into account all of man's life. It seeks to meet him on all levels, and to provide adequately for his needs. While the program does seem commendable, it is necessary to explore it a bit further, in order to determine how valid it really is, and how much of it can be accepted.

VALIDITY OF THE VIEWS

The emphasis on man as a totality involving all of the different facets of his life is a valid one. It prevents one from treating just one element of his personality and then considering that to be the sum total of the ministry the man needs. It gives due recognition to man's socio-economic situation, and properly indicates the necessity of dealing with this, and of providing liberation from oppression in this area of life. The location of salvation in the sphere of history is also a valid and vital contribution. The Christian life must, indeed, be lived in the context of a history that is pregnant with the realities of injustice and oppression. Any adequate accounting of the work of Christ must take these elements into consideration.

The reaction against restricting salvation to the "religious" sphere can be understood against the background of oppression and injustice both crying out for redress and receiving no comprehensive answer. It is difficult, however, to see how the stricture can be maintained, in the face of the witness of Scripture and the experience of the ages. Does Scripture speak overwhelmingly of the kind of vision presented by Gutierrez and other liberationists? Is there a consistent voice in Scripture that says that Jesus Christ came to die on the cross in order that man may be liberated from sin, the root cause of injustice and oppression; in order that man may mature to the point where he shapes his own destiny in history; in order that man may be liberated from the forces of economic oppression and enslavement? Does the Scripture present such a vision of the work of Christ?

The answer to the above questions seems quite clear. While Scripture does have much to say on the matters of justice and oppression, it does not present the kind of vision embraced in the teachings of liberation theology. It does say much on the standard of God concerning economic affairs. It is clear that a necessary corollary of the work of Christ in human hearts is that they fulfill the divine standards. It is yet to be demonstrated, however, how the work of Christ brings about liberation in the spheres specified by liberation theology.

Even if the assertion concerning the effect of the work of Christ in these spheres were true, one significant problem would yet remain: How is it possible for all men to share in its benefits? For too many liberationists there is an assumption that the benefits of the Gospel apply automatically to all men, even where there has been no prior commitment to Jesus Christ. Theirs is a universalistic conception of

the gospel, an assumption that does not fit the Biblical evidence.

This is where the theology of liberation reveals its partial support from Scripture. For while it acknowledges the fact that the New Testament teaches the "for allness" of salvation, i.e. salvation as an offer to all men, it fails to take into account the equally valid teaching that salvation is not appropriated automatically but through an act of faith, and that those who do not respond in faith to the good news of salvation remain in their trespasses and sins. To put it in the words of the Gospel of John: "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him." (Jn. 3:36).¹⁶

The Scriptures do not support the position of universalism. There is need for personal commitment to Christ, in faith and in repentance. Until these take place, man will know no true liberation.

It cannot be demonstrated that the liberation provided by Christ automatically brings about freedom from oppression and injustice. The experience of the ages is that many fervent believers in Jesus Christ, while manifesting the fruit of the Spirit, do not demonstrate freedom from oppression or from economic problems. Freedom from oppression and injustice are implications that ought to be worked out, and represent a project that lies ahead. Its fulfilment must await the eschatological outworking of the divine promises.

The major thrust of "liberation" as taught in liberation theology leaves open the question of personal faith in Jesus Christ. Its universalistic element fails to accord with the teaching of Scripture. Its introduction of the many elements that do not bear directly on the root of sin, that do not give full weight to the spiritual dimension of the problem, leaves much to be desired. "Liberation" as defined by liberation theology is a good reflection of the socio-political needs and aspirations of the oppressed, but is not good, sound Scripture teaching.

¹⁶Costas, *ibid.*, p. 258.

One of the strongest criticisms of liberation theology, at this point, is its strongly humanistic bent. It puts man in charge of his own destiny, shaping himself and making his own history. God becomes nonexistent or, at the very most, a passive observer of the human scene, accommodating Himself to the end product of human endeavor. Gone is the recognition that He is sovereign Lord and that He does exercise this sovereignty at all times. The view neither does justice to God, nor does it provide an adequate answer to the human dilemma. Man, no matter how intellectually advanced he may be, no matter how highly motivated, cannot control his destiny without reference to the divine desires and might. Liberation theology limps lamely in the matter of its expectations of man, requiring of him responses he is incapable of producing, except with divine aid and personal, revolutionary transformation.

Perhaps one of the strongest criticisms that can be offered is the fact that liberation theology has an inadequate analysis of the root causes of underdevelopment and economic backwardness. Liberation theology has spoken the truth, but not the whole truth. The shape of international trade relations has favored the developed nations over the developing ones. There is, at the national level, an inequitable distribution of wealth. What is not discussed or handled properly, however, is the fact that some underdevelopment does not spring from external factors at all,¹⁷ but are based on economic ineptitude and fiscal mismanagement. The situation in many countries would be vastly improved today, were it not for an absence of effective forward planning, and for an overabundance of corruption.

¹⁷Piero Gheddo, Why is the Third World Poor? (New York: Orbis Books, 1973), p. 5.

One of the greatest contributions the movement could make is to get people, especially national leaders, to begin to accept such blame as is rightly theirs and set their houses in order, before attempting to deal with an external enemy.

The attempt to better the economic welfare of individuals is indeed commendable. Two segments of the church have become extremists in this matter, to the total neglect of Scripture teaching. Liberation theologians are impatient with the idea of waiting on tomorrow and the provisions laid up in store by God for those in vital relationship to Jesus Christ. They want the structures overturned now and demand an immediate redistribution of the economic pie. Affluent societies may condemn these radicals for their materialism, while failing to see that the only essential difference is that the liberationists strive for a materialism designed to free from need, while affluent believers, representing the other extreme, strive for a materialism of excess, to demonstrate in a tangible manner that God does lavish His best gifts on His own. Clearly both groups need to remember that Scriptures do not present any such picture of utopia in the present time. The New Jerusalem is a future, not a present project.

CONCLUSION

"Liberation" in liberation theology is not a simple idea with a single meaning. It is a multifaceted idea, involving at least three elements: economic liberation, man making himself in history and the level of faith. It calls for an approach which treats man in his totality and seeks to meet all his needs completely. The view fails to accord with the total teaching of Scripture and as such, cannot be wholeheartedly

embraced.

The task in the next chapter will be to examine the time frame in which liberating activity must take place, and motivating factors specifically related to the eschaton.

Chapter 4

ESCHATOLOGY

The choice of eschatology as a subject for discussion was not a random one. It arose out of an understanding that in the larger church this subject is assuming increasing prominence as a focal point of discussion. This increasing importance is reflected in the proliferation of numerous recent books, films and seminars dealing with the subject. It seemed appropriate to attempt to determine how liberation theology relates to this vital area of theological reflection.

The chief motivation behind the selection lay, however, in liberation theology itself, not in an external factor. It was not difficult to determine that eschatology occupies a place of primary importance and that much, if not all, of the movement's teachings and activities assume eschatological importance. In this light it may be said that liberation discusses the objective, eschatology the time frame and motivation, and politics the means behind all everything that is wrapped up in liberation theology. As the subject is discussed, a good starting point is the traditional definition of eschatology.

A TRADITIONAL DEFINITION

In traditional usage, eschatology is defined as the doctrine of last things. While this definition has had wide currency and has seemed adequate for some time, it failed to address itself to the fullness of ideas embraced by the word. A consequence of this has been the usual

treatment of the subject as a final chapter in theological texts and almost as something added on to the general scheme of divine revelation. This treatment is not adequate. A restructuring of the usual manner of presentation must take place, if the subject is to be presented in its proper perspective.¹ It must be understood that eschatology is not incidental. It is of tremendous importance in coming to grips with the teaching of Scripture. One can only begin to fully understand the scope of divine activity as one gains a proper perspective on the subject and assigns it to a place of proper importance.

It is also important to recognize that eschatology treats of "last things" not in the sense of a series of events that usher in a final end after which everything will pass into a phase of timeless nothingness. "Last things" must be understood as those final events before the introduction of a new manner of divine dealings, before the ushering in of a completely new order of things. "Last things" must also be understood as the final ordering of events, that is, the final state of affairs, consequent upon the ushering in of a new era. As Louis Berkhof defines eschatology, it is both a forward moving process, as well as a final consummation,

The name "eschatology" calls attention to the fact that the history of the world and of the human race will finally reach its consummation. It is not an indefinite and endless process, but a real history moving on to a divinely appointed end. According to Scripture that end will come as a mighty crisis, and the facts and events associated with this crisis form the contents of eschatology.²

¹Gunther Bornkamm, Paul. (New York: Harper, 1969), p. 197.

²Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology. (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1969), p. 667.

Berkhof's definition of eschatology is thoroughly forward looking. He envisages a time when these significant events will come to pass. This view is an acceptable one, but is not the only one propounded, as will be indicated in the following survey of the various kinds of eschatology reflected in liberation theology. A start will be made with the estimate of eschatology held by liberation theology.

THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Eschatology is a focal point in liberation theology. It is not an incidental doctrine but is crucial in determining the direction and activity of the movement. It is defined in such a manner as to place it in the forefront of thinking and activity. In this vein Gutierrez says:

. . . the Bible presents eschatology as the driving force of salvific history radically oriented toward the future. Eschatology is thus not just one more element of Christianity, but the very key to understanding the Christian faith.³

It should be noted that Gutierrez does not see eschatology as a means of interpreting the faith but rather as the key to its understanding. In this respect the movement espouses the same view that is held by some other contemporary theologians.

Two ideas on eschatology which have been held in the Church and which are directly in opposition to each other are futuristic eschatology and realized eschatology. A third view recognizes the tension in eschatological understanding and seeks to steer a middle course.

³Gutierrez, *ibid.*, p. 162.

FUTURISTIC ESCHATOLOGY

Futuristic eschatology accepts the prophecies of Scripture concerning a final consummation of all things. Based upon the observation that such a crisis did not occur during apostolic times, it is held that more time will, of necessity, elapse before the eschatological fulfillment. There is no indication in Scripture as to the time of this fulfillment, and so it is felt that this will take place at some unknown, distant future. This view is described as the "deferred, futuristic type."⁴

This idea is not mythological, as maintained by Macquarrie.⁵ Scriptures do teach a future fulfillment of eschatology. If one did not accept this viewpoint, one would be flying in the face of the evidence of Scripture. In I Thessalonians 5:1-9 the apostle Paul indicates that the coming of the Lord will be a future reality and that the believers should exercise watchfulness lest they be caught unprepared. The same idea of a future consummation is conveyed in Philippians 4:4-7 and Romans 8:18-25. In dealing with this question of a future eschaton Berkhof states:

To teach that Jesus regarded the Second Coming as immediately at hand, would be to represent him as in error, since almost two thousand years have already elapsed since that time.⁶

If, then, one is to rely on the evidence from the teaching of Jesus and of the apostle Paul, there is a future aspect to eschatology. There is yet more to be fulfilled at a future time. Liberation theology does not accept a purely futuristic interpretation of eschatology, and for good reasons.

⁴John Macquarrie, Principles of Christian Theology. (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1966), p. 315.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Berkhof, *ibid.*, p. 697.

While the weight of evidence does support a future unfolding of the eschaton, Macquarrie is yet true in criticizing this viewpoint because it robs eschatology of its existential significance.⁷ A tentative solution was found in the viewpoint known as "realized" or "inaugurated" eschatology.

REALIZED ESCHATOLOGY

This view holds that the promised eschaton is not future, but that it has already been fulfilled in the life, ministry and death of Jesus. There is no future of fulfillment towards which one should look. C. H. Dodd, one of the proponents of this view, reflects upon the expectations of the early disciples concerning the parousia. He declared that after much thought concerning the failure of their expectations, it finally dawned on them that the fulfillment had already come in Jesus Christ. They realized that

. . . the thing had happened; Christ had come. All these years they had been living on that fact, while they supposed their faith hung upon the prospect of His second coming. Now it came home to them: God's victory was won; Christ had won it; and they already shared it.⁸

For Dodd the investment of the apostles with the power of the Holy Spirit subsequent to the resurrection of Christ was the inauguration of a new era, the era of the realization of the promised eschaton. The long awaited crisis of the kingdom of God found inauguration in the ministry

⁷Macquarrie, *ibid.*, p. 315.

⁸C. H. Dodd, The Coming of Christ. (Cambridge: University Press, 1951), p. 8.

of Christ, and completion after His death. Christ has come and sits on the throne. The eschaton is realized.⁹

This viewpoint was not pulled from the air and imposed upon Scripture. There are definite references which lend it support. The Johannine testimony is strong. John constantly calls his hearers back to the present aspect of the eschaton. The believer has eternal life and has passed from death to life,¹⁰ and judgment has come.¹¹ In the epistles Paul maintains that the end of the ages has come¹² and that "now is the day of salvation."¹³ He also speaks of the newness introduced through relationship to Christ.¹⁴

A liberationist perspective of realized eschatology is treated in Jose Miranda's Being and the Messiah.¹⁵ The work is a commentary on the gospel of John and the eschatological perspective is shaped entirely by the teaching of that book. No attempt is made to reconcile this teaching with the rest of Scripture. The witness of other Bible writers is deliberately neglected and Scripture is not used to interpret itself. Miranda states quite clearly that he sees no reason to present a unified witness. He declares that "There is no basis for the dogmatic presupposition that they must all be saying the same thing."¹⁶ For Miranda the doctrine of the unity of Scripture flowing from common inspiration by the Holy Spirit does not appear to be of any significance.

⁹Ibid., pp. 15, 16.

¹⁰John 5:24

¹¹John 12:31

¹²I Corinthians 10:11

¹³II Corinthians 6:2

¹⁴II Corinthians 5:17

¹⁵Jose Miranda, Being and the Messiah. (New York: Orbis Books: 1977).

¹⁶Ibid., p. 204

Miranda maintains that modern exegetes attempt to "postpone the eschaton." ¹⁷ He rejects the idea of a future fulfillment. He criticizes Bultmannian interpretation because it dehistoricizes the eschaton. This he considers to be its principal flaw.

In fact, this detemporalization has been the principal tool of the theology that tranquillizes consciences and legitimates crimes committed in the name of "imperishable Christian values." The detemporalizing of the eschaton - rejuvenated by Bultmann - strips the eschaton of the only real meaning it could possibly have.¹⁸

Over against these rejected options Miranda maintains that the teaching of John indicates that the eschaton is a present, temporal reality. In Christ the eschaton has already come. This is the thrust of Christ's discussion with Martha in John 11:23-26; the Samaritan woman in John 4:25-26 and with the blind man in John 9:35-37.¹⁹ In these discussions Christ makes clear that, in spite of current thinking that would place the eschaton in some future era, it had truly come in Him. The parousia, Miranda says, "coincides with Pentecost."²⁰ He maintains further:

Both the Parousia and eternal life are already a present fact in our history. The qualitative identity of the works and the nonresorbable summons of "the world" are able authentically to reveal God and to transcend insofar as they are eschaton, insofar as we can no longer postpone the realization of justice and unending life, insofar as we need wait for nothing else. All theological efforts to postpone the eschaton and confine God to "heaven" founder upon this absolute proclamation: "From now on you know him and you have seen him."²¹

The eschaton is seen as a present reality, making it unnecessary to wait for anything else. It is not an event that takes place beyond history, but is "rather the final and definitive stage of history."²² Eschatology

¹⁷Ibid., p. 179.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 131, 132.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 173-175.

²⁰Ibid., p. 207.

²¹Ibid., p. 214.

²²Ibid., p. 56.

finds its fulfillment in this world. It is not fulfilled in an extra-terrestrial world. For this reason the heavenly Jerusalem is a provisional one, and will come down to earth.²³

While there is undoubted support for some form of realized eschatology, it flies in the face of the total witness of Scripture if it is taken as the sole revelation concerning eschatology. Jon Sobrino is correct in maintaining that

. . . the resurrection does not cause the disappearance of the eschatological outlook. It is not as if the grand finale had taken place in the resurrection.²⁴

It is necessary to discover a mediating position between a purely futuristic eschatology and realized eschatology. That mediating position recognizes that while much of the eschatological expectation has been realized, there is yet much more to come.

PRESENT YET FUTURE ESCHATOLOGY

Gutierrez begins his view of the eschatological outlook with the Promise given by God to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-2 and 15:1-16 concerning numerous posterity and universal blessing through them. Jesus, John the Baptist (Luke 3:8; 13:16; 16:22; 19:19) and Paul (Galatians 3:16-29; Romans 4; Hebrews 11), place Abraham at the beginning of the work of revelation. The Promise was further unfolded in numerous promises given by God in the course of history, especially the promises concerning the New Covenant and the Kingdom of God. Gutierrez maintains that the Promise has not found complete fulfillment in these promises, since it goes beyond

²³Ibid., pp. 56-59.

²⁴Jon Sobrino, Christology at the Crossroads (New York: Orbis Books, 1978), p. 271.

them. He declares:

The Promise is gradually revealed in all its universality and concrete expression; it is already fulfilled in historical events, but not yet completely; it incessantly projects itself into the future, creating a permanent historical mobility. The promise is inexhaustible and dominates history, because it is the self-communication of God.²⁵

Here is the recognition of the tension between the present fulfillment and the future expectation. Gutierrez recognizes that in the incarnation of Jesus Christ and the coming of the Spirit a qualitatively new age has been launched. The self-communication of God, he says, "has entered into a decisive stage" (Gal. 3:14; Eph. 1:13; Acts 2:38-39; Luke 24:29). " ²⁶

But by the same token, the Promise illuminates and fructifies the future of humanity and leads it through incipient realizations towards its fullness. Both the present and future aspects are indispensable for tracing the relationship between Promise and history.²⁷

At this point Gutierrez has correctly perceived the balance that must be maintained between the present reality and the future hope. Only this proper tension gives adequate weight to the full witness of Scripture. The full benefits of the eschatological work of Christ have not yet been realized. That work is still in progress. There is more to come. It is not necessary to reject the Johannine witness that something qualitatively new has occurred with the coming of Christ, nor does one have to reject the testimony that more is yet to come.

A similar witness is given by Leonardo Boff who indicates what has already been stated as the only possible resolution of the tension.

²⁵Gutierrez, *ibid.*, pp. 160-161. ²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷*Ibid.*

The eschaton is a present reality but yet a future expectation. Divine intervention will occur at some later historic time, bringing about a totally different situation from that which currently exists. The kingdom will then have been ushered in, in all its fullness.²⁸

To treat eschatology as realized is to recognize its existential aspect, and to give full weight to it. It does recognize that, with the life, ministry and death of Christ a new age had dawned and that this has implications for the here and now. Macquarrie grants the value of this existential aspect, especially as it is heightened by the individualized aspect as defined by Bultmann, but he recognizes that this individualized treatment does not give enough weight to all of the evidence, since it neglects the "cosmic and communal dimensions."²⁹

To maintain that Scripture supports a future eschaton and that it also supports a present reality is to introduce a paradoxical juxtaposition. This is exactly what Scripture does, and thereby creates a tremendous tension in eschatological thinking. The solution to the dilemma can only be found in recognizing and in accepting this tension. The only correct way to go is to accept that there is a present, yet future eschatology.

For all liberationists, eschatology has tremendous implications for praxis. This makes eschatology a significant crisis, whether one views it as completely realized now, or as only partially realized.

²⁸Boff, *ibid.*, p. 160.

²⁹Macquarrie, *ibid.*, pp. 316,317.

ESCHATOLOGY AS CRISIS

Eschatology is described as a temporal, existential, situational and practical crisis. It is the proclamation of the gospel. Sobrino, who gives this indication, continues his discussion by pointing out that:

They all share the motion that people and history cannot go on as before in the face of this proclamation of the kingdom. No longer permitted to follow the old routine, people and history must change. Hence the concept of "eschatology" is wholly consistent with Jesus' fundamental demand for a conversion (metanoia).³⁰

Sobrino states that the necessity for change is an important element in eschatology, but that it is not the product of human effort, but is fulfillment, hence a work of God. On the subjective level the believer recognizes that none of the present life corresponds to the kingdom and so is prepared to live a life similar to the life of Jesus. Objectively, he maintains an openness to the transforming reality of God. There is an abiding tension between works and faith. To what extent may the believer sit back and await the unfolding of the divine plan through the presence and activity of God and without human assistance? Does the posture of patient expectation mirror the approach of faith, or does faith call for active personal involvement in bringing about the kingdom? Sobrino sees

. . . a tension between fashioning the kingdom on the one hand and asserting that God is drawing near in grace on the other. On the basis of Jesus' own eschatology we can say that both aspects are real and important, even when they cannot be reconciled by thought. However, the quandary can be reconciled in and through

³⁰Sobrino, *ibid.*, p. 65.

concrete praxis insofar as the individual or some larger group undertakes the work of partially fashioning the kingdom and experiences that effort as a gratuitous gift of grace.³¹

The solution posed by Sobrino is one where recognition is given to the fact that eschatology is all a work of God, but yet a work in which man may cooperate. Man is not seen as a prime mover in this activity.

In the midst of the tension between present realization and future fulfillment, Gutierrez sees implications for man, in terms of his activities. Man is revealed to himself and "the perspective of his historical commitment here and now" is widened.³² Gutierrez rejects a purely "spiritual" eschatology, arguing against the devaluation and elimination of temporal and earthly realities. Eschatology is rather a transformation of the present historical reality. The fulfillment promised in the future can only take place in the context of temporal, historical reality. Eschatology has to do with the broad compass of human endeavors and realities. Gutierrez continues:

Its presence is an intrahistorical reality. The grace-sin conflict, the coming of the kingdom, and the expectation of the parousia are also necessarily and inevitably historical, temporal, earthly, social and material realities.³³

The shape of the eschatological event, especially the emergence of the kingdom, will have tremendous implications for all of life, especially the bringing about of social justice.

It presupposes the defence of the rights of the poor, punishment of the oppressors, a life free from the fear of being enslaved by others, the liberation of the oppressed.

³¹Ibid., p. 66

³²Gutierrez, *ibid.*, p. 165.

³³Ibid., p. 167.

Peace, justice, love, and freedom are not private realities; they are not internal attitudes. They are social realities implying a historical liberation. A poorly understood spiritualization has often made us forget the human consequences of the eschatological promises and the power to transform social structures which they imply.³⁴

The consequence of the eschaton, as proposed by Miranda, is nothing short of a radical involvement in the project of bringing about social justice. Christians fail to embark on the task of conquering the world in the name of love of neighbor because of a lack of belief that the eschaton is here. They have been ensnared by civilization and have transformed Christianity into a traditional religion. The messiahship of Jesus is thereby denied and Christians "have withdrawn themselves from the otherness of millions of tormented human beings."³⁵

The eschaton, Miranda maintains, is a present, moral imperative, in which the oppression, injustice and enslavement of mankind become significant elements, as there is constant effort to abolish them from the scene of history. His language is strong and militant as he speaks with great conviction. For him the task of personal involvement in this eschaton is not debatable.

A God who is reconciled or merely indifferent to the pain of human beings is a merciless God, not the ethical God whom the Bible knows. We would be morally obliged to rebel against such a god, even if our defeat were inevitable. Equally immoral is the god for whom the end of injustice and innocent suffering is a secondary or subordinate imperative. Hence the New Testament intransigence with regard to the eschaton. It is not for apologetical reasons nor to gratify less-than-divine yearnings and desires that the God of Jesus Christ comes to establish justice and life now; it is because

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Miranda, *ibid.*, p. 196.

that is God's unmistakable essence.³⁶

Miranda proceeds from this perceived image of God as a God of justice to indicate that anything but total involvement in the project of love and justice for all is self-deception and an enclosure "in our own immanence."³⁷ The eschaton is now, and impels man into action on its behalf.

The recognition that God is a God of justice and that the believer's role should be one of involvement in the project to bring this about in society is a correct one. From the previous discussion of realized eschatology it should be apparent that Miranda fails precisely at the point where he makes eschatology only a here-and-now reality. One does not have to insist upon this in order to issue an effective call to responsible thinking and action. Indeed, the constant witness of Scripture, for example the Thessalonian epistles, is that the fact that the eschaton is future provides a very strong spiritual and moral incentive to the living out of the full implications of the gospel.

The correct emphasis, therefore, is that which brings the believer to recognize the fact that the eschaton is present, yet future. This view also emphasizes the fact that the fulfillment will not be in a spiritual sense only, but will also be in a truly temporal, historical setting. This eschatological hope is the basis for present action and, if rightly defined, will lead to increasing involvement in the affairs of mankind. It will not cause believers to become cloistered in communities separated from the stark realities of life, but will open their eyes to them, and

³⁶Ibid., p. 187.

³⁷Ibid., pp. 191-192.

elicit personal involvement. Since Christians, by virtue of their relationship to Jesus Christ, have already begun to experience the fruit of the eschaton, their lives will be patterned, not after this world's standards, but will rather mirror the standards and expectations of the new age. Social justice, freedom from oppression and the manifestation of love will be hallmarks of the believer.

Gutierrez declares:

The hope which overcomes death must be rooted in the heart of historical praxis; if this hope does not take shape in the present to lead it forward, it will be only an evasion, a futuristic illusion. One must be extremely careful not to replace a Christianity of the Beyond with a Christianity of the Future; if the former tended to forget the world, the latter runs the risk of neglecting a miserable and unjust present and the struggle for liberation.³⁸

Liberation theology is also incorrect when it makes eschatology a purely human venture. Miranda speaks about the human activity that is necessary, but he does not leave any place for God. This anthropocentric eschaton finds no support in Scripture.

While the strength of opinion does support the view that there must be involvement in the present historical situation, either as part of the eschatological present or in anticipation of the future of eschatology, it cannot be demonstrated that this is all that is involved in eschatology.

CONCLUSION

There does not really seem to be any justification for suggesting that one's eschatological vision should restrict one's involvement in the

³⁸Gutierrez, *ibid.*, p. 218.

day to day realities of life. It speaks strongly in favor of involvement in the name of Christ, working for the elimination of those factors that are not God honoring and that tend to oppress mankind. The believer, as believer and as political man, must involve himself in a task that is truly political, as he receives directions from the Word and as he receives strength from God.

Chapter 5

POLITICS

Politics is usually conceived as embracing political parties, elected and appointed functionaries and the policies and practices devised and administered by them. This tightly defined conception, locked into the ideological bases of particular parties, has been seen as a factor which necessarily restricts the involvement of certain people in the political arena. The fact of the matter is that the scope of politics is so wide that it embraces all of human life and activity. No one is outside of its pale. No one may truly claim to be uninvolved in the political process, no matter how much opposition there may be to the embracing of a particular party. Distance from the political process is a figment of the imagination.

Any claim to uninvolvedness in the political arena can only spring from an incorrect definition of politics. A correct understanding of the word recognizes the fact that it embraces the whole totality of human affairs and therefore takes all people within its ambit. Allen Kelly is correct when he states:

It would be well to make clear that the use of such words and phrases as "politics," and "political realm," etc., is not in the restricted sense of pertaining to the civil government, the functions of the state. Preferred is the more general, philosophical and expanded meaning derived from Aristotle's Politics or the German word Politik. This would be in line with Webster's

second definition: "The theory or practice of managing . . . affairs of public policy . . ." It embraces human conduct in its total social dimension.¹

Based on this definition it is apparent that the discussion so far has had to do with political matters. It has been indicated that liberation theology begins with the matter of oppression and that its primary focus is liberating man from all kinds of oppression. The previous chapter indicated the urgency of the task, given the presence or the expectation of the eschaton. All of that is political action. This chapter will focus specifically on the manner in which liberation can be achieved, that is, through involvement in the political arena. It will deal with the role of the church in politics, as articulated in liberation theology.

THE PRIORITY OF POLITICS

In liberation theolgy politics is placed uppermost on the list of priorities facing mankind. It is not seen as one of several competing interests but as the activity of primary concern. It is the driving force of man's life and occupies most of his thought and activity. So Gutierrez declares:

Human reason has become political reason. For the contemporary historical consciousness, things political are not only those which one attends to during the free time afforded by his private life; nor are they even a well-defined area of human existence. The construction - from its economic bases - of the "polis" of a society in which people can live in solidarity, in a dimension which encompasses and severely conditions all of a man's activity. It is the sphere for the exercise of a critical freedom which is

¹Allen D. Kelley, Christian and Political Responsibility. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), p. 17.

won down through history. It is the universal determinant and the collective arena for human fulfillment.²

When one considers the vast spectrum of human activities that intersect with the political, one is inclined to give politics at least a very high rating on the scale of human interests. This rating is in keeping with the definition previously given, which indicated that politics does embrace all of human life, affecting every social dimension. Quite clearly, then, whatever one's personal stance in relation to politics, whatever the distance one tries to maintain, one is involved in the political process either as actor or as beneficiary. Politics is a very vital element in human life.

To accept the fact that politics plays a very vital role in the human arena is not to immediately accept the proposition that it ought to be the Church's primary task, as the liberationists insist. Hugo Assmann insists that for him politics is not an addendum to faith, as a bonus. He sees the life of faith as being inseparable from political involvement.³ Segundo takes the argument a step further. For him all of life involves political options. It is impossible to think in politically neutral or apolitical terms. Questions of poverty and the imbalance in the distribution of wealth cannot be dealt with by the giving of alms. Its political implications must be examined and political answers must be given. Jesus' teaching on love, Segundo continues, taken into the present historical situation, cannot be fleshed out in any but a political manner. The theology of liberation, to be effective in its address to the problems in society, must view

²Gutierrez, *ibid.*, p. 47.

³Assmann, *ibid.*, pp. 34,35.

these problems ideologically. The severance between politics and theology is impossible.⁴ The traditional strictures against the church involving itself in politics cannot hold longer as they fail to comport with present reality. Segundo summarizes his arguments in three statements:

1. Every theology is political, even one that does not speak or think in political terms. The influence of politics on theology and every other cultural sphere cannot be evaded any more than the influence of theology on politics and other spheres of human thinking. The worst politics of all would be to let theology perform this function unconsciously, for that brand of politics is always bound up with the status quo.

2. Liberation theology consciously and explicitly accepts its relationship with politics. First of all, it incorporates into its own methodology the task of ideological analysis that is situated on the boundary line between sociology and politics. And insofar as direct politics is concerned, it is more concerned about avoiding the (false) impartiality of academic theology than it is about taking sides and consequently giving ammunition to those who accuse it of partisanship.

3. When academic theology accuses liberation theology of being political and engaging in politics, thus ignoring its own tie-up with the political status quo it is really looking for a scapegoat to squelch its own guilt complex.⁵

The first point is, of course, a necessary corollary to the idea that all of life is political, that every man is involved in the political enterprise. The unconscious performance of the political function by theology arises out of tacit acceptance of the status quo - that is, where theology makes no statements it thereby supports the present system. Segundo is not willing to grant this approach by the church. Liberation theology refuses to accept a quiescent role. It engages in analysis and speaks out on the issues without fear of being branded as partisan. Politics holds such an important position in

⁴Segundo, *ibid.*, p. 71.

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

liberation theology that it calls for involvement at the deepest and most intimate level. No surface analysis or passing comments will do.

The placing of politics on the top of the list of priorities reflects a strong reaction against the traditional view of restricting the church from involvement in political affairs. The time-honored reasons given for this non-involvement are: the necessity for believers to isolate themselves from the world's evil; the believer's sole responsibility of winning men to Christ, with a "spiritual" rather than a "social" message; the necessity to strive, above everything else, to please the Lord; the recognition that God is in control and will ultimately deal with the imbalances in the world; the fact that "politics" is dirty, and finally, the realization that "political involvement does not make any difference anyway." Linder and Pierard take each argument and demonstrate their underlying fallacies. Indeed, the thrust of the discussion indicates that, were there any truth to some of the presuppositions at all, they should impel to political action, rather than restricting it.⁶

These two ideas are in tension: politics as the foremost concern of the church, and politics as a restricted field of activity. Quite clearly there is need for a resolution of the problem. Balance must be found. This is only possible as Christians cease the practice of dissecting man into several separate realities and as they cease doing the same thing to the gospel. Man must be treated as a whole being and the gospel as a single message. It is only by doing this that the

⁶Robert D. Linder and Richard Pierard, Politics: A Case for Christian Action. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), pp. 26-43.

necessary balance between the two competing options will emerge.

These distortions can be avoided only if we view Christian political witness in the light of the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the total calling of the people of God in the world. It is for this reason that we shall stress the need for a context for evangelism. God's people are called by him to be a faithful community. When we recognize this, we can avoid the error of failing to seek to be a politically obedient community, and we can also avoid the temptation of viewing the Christian life as primarily a matter of political activity.⁷

Liberation theology falls into the latter error, that of making politics the sum total of one's life. It assigns a place of priority to politics. This distorts the picture somewhat, since the true picture is one of balance which neither deemphasizes nor glorifies the church's political task. With this understanding in mind, this section can be concluded with two statements, one by Linder and Pierard, and the other by Richard Mouw.

The statement by Linder and Pierard is an extremely crucial one, since many people object to political involvement because there is not an abundance of references to this in the New Testament. Their argument is clear and speaks directly to the matter and, while not couched in dogmatic language, does point the way to a possible resolution of this issue.

One may speculate, however, that God intended this silence in order to avoid incorporating into the Scriptures a first-century political legalism that in later times would have appeared to be rigid and irrelevant. One can observe that since the early believers expected the Lord to return momentarily, this effectively kept down much interest in current political, social and economic problems. Also, since the Roman system denied

⁷Richard J. Mouw, Political Evangelism. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans, 1973), pp. 18, 19.

political power and responsibility to the great majority of its citizens, specific directions for political participation would not have been meaningful in the context of the period.⁸

Mouw's statement emphasizes the multifaceted nature of the evangelistic task:

But evangelistic activity must take place on many fronts, for the gospel in its fulness must be directed to all dimensions of human life. Christ's atoning work offers liberation for people in their cultural endeavors, in their family lives, in their educational pursuits, in their quests for esxual fulfilment, in their desire for physical well-being. It also offers liberation in the building of political institutions and the making of public policy.⁹

These two witnesses, who are not liberation theologians, call for balance but do not deny the necessity for some kind of political involvement in the contemporary setting. Liberation theology is not in error in its insistence that the church cannot ignore the necessity for involvement in the political enterprise. The task at this point is to indicate the nature of this involvement, as delineated by that theology.

MARXIST THOUGHT IN LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Liberation theology makes use of language and ideas borrowed from Marxism. The connection appears to be so close as to make the systems seem to be indistinguishable at points. It is for th s reason that it is essential that the relationship be defined clearly.

In addressing the subject of liberation, Jose Miguez-Bonino acknowledges the value of the Marxist critique, especially when set over against the contemporary distortions of essential Christian teaching about man. Marx was right, he said, in demanding that liberation be something that really happens to man, freeing him from enslavement. Liberation

⁸Linder and Pierard, *ibid.*, pp. 50,51. ⁹Mouw, *ibid.*, pp. 14,15.

cannot be merely explanations as to how to cope with slavery. Marx was also correct in pointing to liberation as involving all of man's being, rather than just his inner self. Miguez-Bonino points out, however, that Marxism does fall short, "both in theory and practice." Socialism fails to remove alienation, and Marxist theory winds up being abhorrent to the Christian at the point of its denial of God. He summarizes his argument as follows:

In this sense, Marxism can be understood by Christians as:
a) a scientific theory of society which, corrected and perfected as all theory should be, becomes significant and useful for a necessary transformation of man's life, and b) a humanism that presides over and stimulates the search for liberating action, legitimate as a motivation, positive as a corrective to deformations of which we Christians share the guilt, but ultimately insufficient and unfounded, seeing that it "alienates men from the fundamental structures of their being, their relation to God." ¹⁰

There is, therefore, no unquestioning acceptance of Marxist thought, but there is acceptance and use of such insights it provides for constructing a praxis of liberation.

Peter Hebblethwaite, in his survey of the movement, arrives at the same conclusion. Marxist thinking is utilized in liberation theology, but the movement has not made an ideological commitment.

None of this adds up to Marxism in any precise form. Nevertheless, Marxism is implicit all along in the assertion of the primacy of action or praxis, in the idea that a choice of the oppressed will lead to further knowledge, and as we shall see, in the acceptance of class-conflict as a positive force. But Marxism is not discussed with much clarity by the theologians

¹⁰Jose Miguez-Bonino, "Theology and Liberation" International Review of Missions, January 1972, pp. 71,72.

of liberation. They are Marxists because of the lack of any alternative analysis of society and the causes of its oppression. Their use of Marxism is instrumental, that is to say, practical rather than ideological.¹¹

In the face of this acknowledged dependence upon Marxist thought one is impelled to question how European theology is neglected as being a foreign transplant, necessitating the development of a distinctively Latin American theology, but yet Marxist thought can be accepted to the extent that it has been. Are we witnessing a double standard at this point?

The use of Marxist thought will be reflected in the following survey and at times there will be interaction with liberation theology and Marxism as one system, given the fact of their correspondence at those points.

THE CHURCH'S POLITICAL TASKS

In keeping with the view that politics stands uppermost on the church's list of priorities, liberation theology has set certain goals for involvement. These goals all point to involvement at a very deep level. A superficial commitment and shallow involvement will not do. The church is called upon to commit all her energies and resources to the grand task of political transformation. Segundo speaks well to this issue when he declares that:

. . . the methodology of an ever liberated and liberating theology is not an emotional sinecure. One cannot simply utter the word "liberation" and then link it with the Scriptures in more

¹¹Peter Hebblethwaite, The Christian-Marxist Dialogue. (New York : Paulist Press, 1977), p. 50.

or less slipshod fashion. Neither is it an ingenuous approach that allows the theologian to take the easy way out that is often taken by academic theology. For it does not allow theologians to set aside the great problems of today on the pretext that they belong to other fields or disciplines. Instead it forces them to confront the major problems of history, biology, evolution, social change, and so forth.¹²

The church's task will not be a text quoting "religious" type of approach to political affairs. Again, it will be commitment and involvement at a very deep level and will involve specific tasks. Specifically, Gutierrez indicates, the church must define its relation to social injustice, denounce injustice and announce the gospel. In this treatment of the church's function, Gutierrez is describing a multifaceted process described as conscientization. The word has gained currency in the writings of Paulo Friere, a humanist, who is deeply committed to the liberation of the oppressed in Latin America. He indicates that essential elements include a historical commitment to bring in utopia, denouncing the oppressive structures and announcing the liberating movement.¹³ Gutierrez seems to make essentially the same points in his treatment.

Defining its Relation to Social Injustice

The Latin American church must recognize that it is intimately tied to the prevailing social system. It is not neutral. Liberation theology states that the church is protected by the capitalist class, and hence it is a part of the system. Its message is only another element in the capitalist ideology. To say that there is no involvement in political affairs is to employ a subterfuge and thereby prevent a change

¹²Segundo, *ibid.*, p. 237.

¹³Paulo Friere, "Conscientisation" Crosscurrents, 1974, pp. 23-31.

in the status quo. The church enjoys political and social power and influence. The question is: Should the church use this power or divest itself of it? The route to divestment is through identification with the poor and oppressed, through casting its lot with the struggle against injustice. This response to the concrete historical situation in Latin America will anger the governing capitalist class and cost the church in terms of the loss of its support. By this fact divestment will come. The church must define its relation to prevailing social injustice and to the revolutionary movement seeking to uproot it and replace it with a just social order.¹⁴

At this point, of course, the movement recognizes the necessity for an analysis of society, its economic and social processes, oppression and its causes, the oppressed and oppressors. This analysis will be done with the use of Marxist tools of analysis.

The church's task of defining its relation to social injustice is a corollary of the next task, that of denouncing injustice. The church, it will be seen, has a responsibility to speak out on behalf of the poor, the underprivileged and the oppressed. It is impossible for this task to be undertaken without the declaration that the church does not support injustice and that it is not engaged in the practice of oppression. This definition, however, must precede the denunciation of injustice, in order to indicate the background out of which the denunciation emerges.

¹⁴Gutierrez, *ibid.*, pp. 265-267.

Denunciation of Injustice

In the face of injustice, oppression and other dehumanizing factors, the church is called upon to radically criticize these very elements. If there are factors in church thought and practice which seem to sacralize these structures of oppression, the church must denounce them. Since it occupies a public position in Latin American society, any denunciation done by the church must also be public.¹⁵

This denunciation must be at the level of root causes, rather than merely just indicating and dealing with consequences. The church must carefully avoid the danger of

. . . becoming functional to the system all over again, only this time to a system which tries to modernize and to suppress the most outrageous injustices without effecting any deep changes.¹⁶

It will flow out of deep critique, including self-analysis as part of the order. It must flow out of involvement with the total social context, rather than ecclesial isolation.

At this point the movement is correct because this concern for the preaching of the message of justice is in keeping with the Christian abhorrence of all forms of injustice. The Christian cannot remain silent in the face of perceived injustice.

The wickedness of the rich and powerful regularly manifests itself in the form of sins against the poor and oppressed. When such is the case, Christians must renounce any personal rights to pursue riches and power for selfish gain, in order to plead and lobby on behalf of the deprived and afflicted.¹⁷

¹⁵Gutierrez, *ibid.*, p. 267.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷Richard J. Mouw, Politics and the Biblical Drama. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1976), p. 80.

There is an ever increasing awakening to the necessity for evangelical Christians to be bold in asserting themselves on behalf of the exploited. The call is being issued in clear tones. Christians cannot retain a neutral stance, unconcerned about the ills pervading society. The responsibility of proclaiming and working for social justice is indeed a pressing and urgent task. It is not a peripheral responsibility but is rather an essential one.

Evangelicals should stand up for the weak, the poor, and exploited in today's society, because that is what Jesus did in his day. For too long justice has been denied them, and their interests have not been adequately represented in the councils of government. One of the most vital tasks for Christians is to bring about the incorporation of justice into the legislative, administrative, and judicial institutions of the federal, state and local governments. The evangelical community can no longer sit on the sidelines of the current struggle for social justice and serve as the passive mouthpiece of the vested interests of power and wealth who wish to maintain the status quo.¹⁸

While the language indicates that Pierard is writing for a North American community, it is quite obvious that he is saying some of the very same things which the liberation theologians are saying. The church can and ought to be vocal in demanding justice for the poor and underprivileged. This task is not debatable. It is, in fact, in keeping with the image presented by some Old Testament prophets, especially Amos, who inveighed against the injustice in the land and indicated that such calamities as had befallen the nation had come as divine judgment. So, for example, he declared:

These are the words of the Lord: For crime after crime of Israel I will grant them no reprieve, because they sell the

¹⁸Richard V. Pierard, The Unequal Yoke. (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1970), p. 179.

innocent for silver and the destitute for a pair of shoes. They grind the heads of the poor into the earth and thrust the humble out of their way. Father and son resort to the same girl, to the profanation of my holy name. Men lie down beside every altar on garments seized in pledge, and in the house of their God they drink liquor got by way of fines.¹⁹

Isaiah is also quite clear in the performance of the task of denunciation.

He declared:

Shame on you! You who make unjust laws and publish burdensome decrees, depriving the poor of justice, robbing the weakest of my people of their rights, despoiling the widow and plundering the orphan. What will you do when called to account, when ruin from afar confronts you? To whom will you flee for help and where will you leave your children, so that they will not cower before the gaoler or fall by the executioner's hand? For all this his anger has not turned back, and his hand is stretched out still.²⁰

These two passages are not isolated references to a subject to which the Old Testament is stranger. They rather represent a constant refrain indicating that God is truly on the side of the oppressed and that He does not favor oppression in any form whatever.

The call of the liberationists is to a radical commitment to this task of denouncing social injustice. It is couched in such language as to imply that it is the sum total of the gospel. It is essential that the church does not merely switch from tacit support of oppression to the support of revolutionary movements that are bent on promoting "their own selfish ends."²¹ It is also essential that the church does not transfer its allegiance from the Lord to the social order, thereby becoming its slave.²² It must not limit the work of God to the transformation of society, thereby forgetting the other dimensions of the faith.

¹⁹Amos 2:6-8.

²⁰Isa. 10:1-5.

²¹Pierard, *ibid.*, p. 179.

²²Harvie M. Conn, "The Mission of the Church" Evangelicals and Liberation. Carl E. Armerding, ed., (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), p.81.

The two ideas are not really as opposed to each other as may at first seem apparent. Scriptures do give much support to the idea that the faithful must constantly speak against all forms of oppression. As has been maintained elsewhere, however, the gospel must be allowed to affect all facets of life. It cannot be restricted to any given area. To do so would be to rob it of its tremendous power and would pose a restriction not demanded by the gospel itself.

The political tasks of the church are not all negative. There is a positive element: the annunciation of the gospel.

Annunciation of the Gospel

One of the church's important political tasks as envisaged by liberation theology is that of the annunciation of the gospel. This annunciation is a conscientizing or politicizing function. Conscientization or consciousness raising is a task of education, enabling the oppressed to recognize the fact of their oppression, to understand the forces causing their oppression and to cause them to feel the urgency of seeking their liberation. This task of annunciation is not by any means restricted to speaking. It involves practical identification with the oppressed and speaking out of this very real identification.

But this is made real and meaningful only by living and announcing the Gospel from within a commitment to liberation, only in concrete, effective solidarity with people and exploited social classes. Only by participating in their struggles can we understand the implications of the Gospel message and make it have an impact on history. The preaching of the Word will be empty and ahistorical if it tries to avoid this dimension.²³

²³Gutierrez, *ibid.* p. 269.

In this matter of identification with the oppressed, Gutierrez proposes three levels of poverty. The first level is that of economic poverty as inveighed against by the Old Testament prophets, by the Mosaic religion of the Exodus from Egyptian bondage and subsequent legislation favoring the poor, by the mandate of Genesis 1:26 and 2:5 concerning man's creation in the image and likeness of God, by New Testament teaching and, finally, by the fact that in man we meet God.²⁴

In a word, the existence of poverty represents a sundering both of solidarity among men and also of communion with God. Poverty is an expression of sin, that is, of a negation of love. It is therefore incompatible with the coming of the Kingdom of love and justice.²⁵

The second level of poverty indicated by Gutierrez is that of spiritual childhood, of openness to God. It involves a recognition of God's lordship and a yielding to it. It also involves an openness to receive from God.²⁶

The third level is the Christian witness of poverty. Here Segundo speaks out strongly against the idealization of poverty. Poverty is not to be held up as virtuous and as the path to be selected because it has any intrinsic value. Such a route would be contrary to the divine rejection of poverty. It is rather a radical commitment in solidarity with the poor, in which there is a witness to poverty as an evil resulting from sin. This would not be idealization, but rather taking poverty on and protesting and struggling against it as evil, with the intention of abolishing it.²⁷

²⁴Ibid., pp. 291-295.

²⁵Ibid., p. 295.

²⁶Ibid., pp. 269-299.

²⁷Ibid., p. 301.

The "poor" person today is the oppressed one, the one marginated from society, the member of the proletariat struggling for his most basic rights; he is the exploited and plundered social class, the country struggling for its liberation. In today's world the solidarity and protest of which we are speaking have an evident and inevitable "political" character insofar as they imply liberation. To be with the oppressed is to be against the oppressor. In our times and on our continent to be in solidarity with the "poor," understood in this way, means to run personal risks - even to put one's life in danger.²⁸

Underscored by this third level of poverty, is the fact that, in liberation theology, political involvement is by way of practical, personal involvement, rather than armchair theorizing. There is constant movement from ideology and sociological analysis to involvement, to action. This action, Gutierrez points out, is so radical that it may even lead to death. This, however, is no deterrent to the required activity.

The politicizing function of the church is often objected to on the basis that the church becomes partisan. Gutierrez responds to this by pointing out that while the church has had a traditional civilizing function, there is no objection to this. The criticism must be met, he maintains, because the politicizing function is no less necessary than the spreading of ethical, cultural and artistic values embraced by the civilizing function. The politicizing function is objected to, Gutierrez states, because it challenges certain social positions of privilege. To be effective, pastoral activity must be addressed specifically to the oppressed, rather than to the privileged, and it must be undertaken by the oppressed, thus giving them a voice in the church.²⁹

²⁸Ibid., p. 301.

²⁹Ibid., p. 271.

A necessary tool in the struggle for liberation, as envisaged by liberation theology, is the class struggle. The next section will seek to examine this aspect of the movement.

THE CLASS STRUGGLE

Human brotherhood, which has as its ultimate basis our sonship before God, is built in history. Today history is characterized by conflict which seems to impede this building of brotherhood. There is one characterization 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. But this is not all; the division brings with it confrontations, struggles, violence. How can we reconcile the universality of charity with the option for a particular social class? Unity is one of the notes of the Church and yet the class struggle divides men; is the unity of the Church compatible with class struggle?³⁰

In this statement Gutierrez gives an exposition of the class struggle, proceeding from the statement to the question which is most crucial for the church: "Is the unity of the Church compatible with class struggle?" Before proceeding with his answer, it would be well to comment further on class struggle, as Gutierrez sees it. It is evidenced by oppression and is first recognized by the margined. They are its objects and they feel it subjectively as a very pressing and real aspect of everyday life. They do not view it dispassionately from the outside but are deeply involved in it at the personal level, from the inside. He indicates that the recognition of the class struggle cannot be equated with the creation of the class struggle, nor is it the advocating of it.

³⁰Gutierrez, *ibid.*, pp. 272-273.

Those who recognize the class struggle merely give cognizance to its reality. They do not advocate it. They strive to eliminate it. A denial of the class struggle would be tantamount to taking sides with the oppressors. On this matter, he states, it is impossible to take a neutral stance.

By denying the existence of social division, this system seeks to perpetuate this division on which are based the privileges of its beneficiaries. It is a classist option, deceitfully camouflaged by a purported equality before the law.³¹

Gutierrez continues the discussion by indicating that there is a significant tension between the Gospel mandate to love all men and the demands of the class struggle that a decision be made for one class. This latter demand automatically necessitates the choice of one class over the other, and, indeed, the rejection of the dominant class. The paradox of the situation is that the oppressor can only be loved as he is rejected, as he is led to understand, through this rejection of his system, that he is wrong and needs to make radical changes in his thought and praxis.³² The mandate to love even the oppressor is fulfilled only as the error in his ways is pointed out and he is thereby liberated from selfishness and his status as oppressor.

In the context of class struggle today, to love one's enemies presupposes recognizing and accepting that one has class enemies and that it is necessary to combat them. It is not a question of having no enemies, but rather of not excluding them from our love. But love does not mean that the oppressors are no longer enemies, nor does it eliminate the radicalness of the combat against them.

³¹Ibid., p. 276.

³²Ibid.

"Love of enemies" does not ease tensions; rather it challenges the whole system and becomes a subversive formula.³³

For Gutierrez the participation in the class struggle is not the negation of love and is not opposed to the principle of universal love. It is rather a necessary component of the commitment to concretize this love. It is this struggle that will lead to the classless society, void of oppressed and oppressor classes and void of oppression. In the following statement he indicates the crucial role which class struggle plays in the life of the church.

For the ecclesial community to recognize the fact of class struggle and to participate actively in it will not be therefore a negation of the message of unity which it bears; rather it will be to discover the path by which it can free itself from that which now prevents it from being a clear and true sign of brotherhood.³⁴

The vision of the elimination of the distinction between the oppressed and the oppressors is indeed a very valuable and worthwhile one. Certainly this is in keeping with good sense and morality. The question which immediately arises, however, concerns the manner in which this is pursued, and in particular the ramifications of accepting the Marxist dogma of the class struggle. Even if one does grant that the movement does not create but only recognizes an already existing struggle, can it be maintained that the program envisaged by the movement does not contribute to an escalation of the conflict? Does not the language of confrontation indicated previously say quite clearly that there is not only the recognition of the conflict, but that the church will join

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid., p. 278.

forces with the oppressed in a battle against the oppressors? Does not such language and praxis in fact add to the conflict? Is such conflict necessary and does it produce the kinds of results anticipated by the liberationists? Is this conflict consistent with the gospel?

The existence of the class struggle can readily be granted because it is, in fact, a very present and pressing political reality. There are vast differences between classes and this fact has caused some measure of conflict. The struggle, however, is not really limited to the economic plane, but reaches over into the sexual, racial and intellectual areas of life. As such the class struggle plays a dominant role in contemporary society.³⁵

As a widely observed phenomenon, the class struggle is indeed a central political reality. As long as human beings have even a measure of economic liberty, classes will begin to form. As long as absolute tyranny does not rule, the less fortunate class will struggle to rise. Until the rich become unselfish and generous, they will struggle to preserve their privilege. Thus some form of class struggle will always exist as long as people have differing abilities, motivation and advantages.³⁶

So then, the fact of the class struggle is a present reality and does not owe its existence to the theorizing that is done about it. The theorizing follows after and springs from the prior existing reality. In this sense, it is correct to state that those who speak about the class struggle as a driving force in history cannot be accused of being its creators.

³⁵Harold O. J. Brown, Christianity and the Class Struggle. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), pp. 16, 116.

³⁶Ibid., p. 28.

Upon closer examination it becomes clear that the previous justification is limited. There is a vast difference between observing and supporting and observing and further fomenting. What appears to be quite clear is that those who support the class struggle maintain as a primary focus of attention the necessity to ensure that no momentum is lost in the struggle for the creation of the classless society. Indeed, if there is a radical alteration in the economic arena so that the formerly oppressed proletariat now begins to reap the benefits of prosperity and so loses interest in the class struggle, effort will be made to whip up flagging zeal. A thorough going Marxism utilizes any other inherent difference in order to foment a struggle. Here, then, is a significant fact: the Marxist view of class struggle is not really at root one of observation and then participation - it involves, if necessary, an active role as instigator. Brown describes how this militancy works:

If the economic classes are insufficiently hostile to each other, new classes must be found. Existing rivalries and injustices must be exacerbated, exaggerated, exploited and brought to the point of explosion. In short, if economic differences do not provide the necessary tensions, then others must do it.³⁷

Liberation theology is therefore correct in insisting that it does not create the class struggle. It must grant, however, that this phenomenon owes its continuance as an active driving principle directed toward a particular end, to its organization as a tool for action, and to the constant active involvement of those who are determined that it shall not lose momentum.

³⁷Ibid., p. 69.

It is not difficult to discover further support for the view that the class struggle involves a radical militancy of the one class against the other. This is the clear message from Gutierrez who, as has been indicated previously, described the enemy against whom combat must be launched. What is involved here is not a comfortable fireside chat or the meeting of a high school debating society. It is rather the meeting of people who by definition are enemies and the struggle is a very real one. The struggle is not a one time involvement but involves numerous clashes as the one class seeks to gain the ascendancy and the other strives to retain it. There is no easy victory and no easy surrender, the Marxists maintain. Herdern describes the process:

When the mode of production changes, the dispossessed class has the power of history upon its side, so that it inevitably rises, while the former ruling class must pass from the scene. This change will not be made without conflict, for the rulers will fight to retain their privileges. Resistance, however, is useless for the laws of history are now with the rising class as once they were with the ruling class in its hour of triumph.³⁸

The class struggle in Marxism and in liberation theology pits one class against the other, promising that when the one class is stamped out the other will gain peace and justice. It leaves open the question: What of the class that is stamped out? It does not provide any indication as to their place in human history beyond being stamped out. Is there any real justification for the creation of a new type of oppression and tyranny? As Brown indicates, there have been countless times in history where one class has been sacrificed, ostensibly for another, but the

³⁸William Hordern, Christianity, Communism and History. (New York: Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1954), p. 52.

promised peace and justice have not yet arrived.³⁹

The liberationists assume that upon the elimination of the one class the one emerging will be a classless society, without oppressed and oppressors. It will be a society devoid of injustice, selfishness and greed. Quite clearly, there is here the idea that man is innately good and that the evil that does exist is caused by society. Marxists explain that society's original righteousness was lost when, following a change in the means of production, the classes - masters and servants - emerged. A matter which defies explanation, however, is how these classes could possibly have emerged except for a desire within man.⁴⁰ The truth is that man is not innately good and, by holding to this view, the Marxists fail to be consistent.

Communism is left with a basic contradiction. Unless there are in man tendencies to sin, then man would not have made use of changes in production to exploit his fellow men. But if there are such tendencies in man, what is to prevent man in the Communist society from using opportunities in the new order to oppress his fellows? For example, what will prevent the dictatorship of the proletariat from being used by a few to exalt themselves at the expense of society?⁴¹

That this specter of a newly emerging oppressor class is a correct representation is seen from the fact that in Russia, where the rich and middle class have been removed, a new type of oppressor "the dictatorship of the party," or the "dictatorship of the bureaucracy" has emerged.⁴² One type of oppressor has only been replaced by another. The elimination of one class has not really served to produce the qualitative changes

³⁹Ibid., p. 31

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 146.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 147.

that had been promised.

The idea of class struggle is deficient in viewing the problems of injustice, selfishness and exploitation as problems resident in a particular class. In fact, this is not so: the problems are individual, human ones. They are not restricted to a class, but all humans are prone to them. Brown correctly states: "The Marxist error is to think that selfishness and greed are a class problem, not a human one." ⁴²

How then, should the Christian approach the doctrine of class struggle? Quite clearly, it is deficient and does not fit into the Christian scheme. It is a doctrine that cannot be pursued by the believer. Again Brown speaks well to the issue:

However often the phenomenon of class struggle may be observed, it cannot be taken by the Christian as the foundation for his thinking or as the principle for his action, for it denies both the solidarity of mankind and the worth of the individual man. Thus it perverts both biblical judgment and biblical grace. It perverts judgment by applying it only to a particular class and thereby denying implicitly that all have sinned. It perverts grace by teaching men to seek their salvation in changed class conditions, not in a changed human heart. It is in a real sense a truly diabolical doctrine, because, like the diabolos (the "accuser" or the "divider"), it divides men and sets them against each other.⁴³

Liberation theology, by accepting the class struggle, shows itself to be deficient. At this point it is not in keeping with the teaching of Scripture, and cannot be accepted.

⁴²Brown, *ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 31.

CONCLUSION

In liberation theology, politics plays a very crucial role. The church is expected to engage in a deep and thorough analysis of society and of the political processes. The church must proceed from the analysis to the action that is consonant with the demands for social justice. This activity must not be subordinate to other aspects of the church's ministry but must be in the forefront. The theologians of liberation accept the Marxist tools of analysis, call for clear statements of the church's relation to social injustice, denunciation of injustice and annunciation of the Gospel. Finally, liberation theology recognizes the existence of the class struggle, and sees it as vital in achieving the ultimate goal of liberation.

While some of the political views of liberation theology are acceptable and necessary, there are some imbalances, acceptance of any part of the system can only follow careful analysis and necessary restructuring, so that the movement fully reflects the expectations of the Christian Gospel.

Chapter 6

VALUES AND PROBLEMS

Some theologians in Latin America have been very conscious of the socio-politico-economic realities which exist there. They have concluded that an essential aspect of their Christian commitment must be reflection upon these situations and the structuring of a praxis that will be adequate to free the oppressed from the elements that are dehumanizing them. These theologians consider it necessary to begin their theological project at the point of oppression, and to use this as a central motif in their reflection. Consideration has been given to some aspects of this system. It is necessary, at this point, to isolate some values and some problems attending the system.

VALUES

The values of the system are of such a nature as to project themselves to the forefront. They are not difficult to recognize.

Historical Rootedness

The theology of liberation is not a system pulled out of the air and is not confined to the halls of academe. It is not purely a system of theorization, although theory does form a significant portion of the theology. It is in truth a movement, a movement rooted in history. The reflection is not about a future state far removed from present reality. It does not consist of thinking concerning nebulous ideas that

are not realizable in the immediate present. It does not begin with an unknown reality and with objectives that are alien to the people to whom the movement is directed. It is a project related vitally to the people's present existential situation, reflecting upon it and creating a praxis for action designed to liberate them from its oppressive elements. The church cannot be true to its mission if it rejects this element in the theology of liberation, if it fails to give adequate cognizance to the necessity of coming to grips with the historical situation in which man finds himself encased. Costas speaks well to this point, as he indicates that missiology must take this into account. He sees this as the greatest challenge of the movement.

The insistence on the concrete historical situation as a necessary starting point is perhaps the greatest merit of the theology of liberation - and its greatest challenge for the theology of mission. Because it challenges the naivete of so much mission thinking today, which assumes that it is possible to do theology, on the one hand, without being committed politically, and on the other, without taking seriously one's concrete historical situation.¹

If theology is to be effective in meeting man where he is, it must not neglect his historical rootedness. It must not neglect the situation in which it finds man. It must reflect upon and must construct a project for assisting man in his concrete situation. If the Gospel is not seen as affecting man in the concrete historical situation it may be difficult, if not impossible, to show how it relates to the unknown reaches of eternity.

One tremendous value of the historical rootedness of the movement is that it does not import problems from the outside, nor does

¹Costas, *ibid.*, p. 241.

it fight nonexistent problems. It works directly on the real problems felt by Latin Americans and the praxis is constructed on the basis of these perceived problems. Thus in terms of the socio-politico-economic realities, liberation theology is not seen to be irrelevant, but rather as being quite relevant to the situation it seeks to address.

This historical-existential rootedness serves another important function as it relates to the universal church at large. By the rejection of the European mold of theology and the insistence on speaking forth as an adult church it does say to the church at large that diversity, though often neglected, is an essential element in the church. It reminds the church that there are some vital differences in historical and cultural realities and that the Gospel must be shown to apply in these diverse settings or lose any validity that it purports to possess. This historical rootedness finds an important counterpart in the insistence on praxis.

Insistence on Praxis

This element is vitally related to the former and gives it its real force. The movement reflects upon history and then determines to do something about it. It insists that thinking by itself is not as valuable as the doing of something about the situations facing man. Liberation theology is correct in insisting that the Gospel is not all thought, but is essentially action. In the New Testament we find John insisting:

My little children, love must not be a matter of words or talk; it must be genuine, and show itself in action. This is how we may know that we belong to the realm of truth, and convince ourselves in his sight that even if our conscience condemns us, God is greater

than our conscience and knows all.²

As reflected in the Scriptures, love is essentially an outward moving activity. It is not an inner feeling. It is a transforming praxis striving for practical expression. Liberation theology is right: praxis is essential. The performance of praxis is given a particularly keen urgency by virtue of the eschatological views embraced by the movement.

Eschatology as Impetus to Activity

The various elements involved in the eschatological viewpoints of liberation theology have been examined. Indication has been given that, whatever the viewpoint, the movement insists that eschatology is an important impetus to right action to produce necessary change. In this respect the movement does have a valuable emphasis. The inescapable demand of eschatology is the recognition that the term describes a qualitatively new age and that there must be personal involvement in the project of living out the full implications of this hope. Clark Pinnock speaks to this in a quite effective manner when he says:

Taken in the proper way, eschatology is a powerful incentive for radical obedience. "Keep justice and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance will be revealed." Inspired with hope, and recognizing that the night is far spent, we live now as in the Day, walking faithfully before our God. From an ethical viewpoint, this is an unbeatable posture. Despite any and all obstacles, our labor cannot be in vain because it is in the Lord. We do not even have to succeed to go on hoping, because we confess Jesus is King, the firstborn from the dead.³

Pinnock continues by indicating that this eschatological viewpoint will call forth action that is out of step with the old age, and will be more

³Clark Pinnock, "An Evangelical Theology of Human Liberation" Sojourners, January, 1977, p. 50.

oriented toward the age which is to come. Our primary focus will then be the acknowledgment of the lordship of Christ and the working out of the implications in present time. One inescapable implication is that as God speaks for justice, believers must also speak and must identify themselves with the poor.

Identification with the Poor

The movement's stress on the necessity of identifying with the poor is a necessary one. As indicated, this identification is not by way of idealization. The movement does not hold poverty up as an ideal towards which one must strive, but as an evil which should be stamped out, an evil against which every effort must be bent. Identification with the poor is therefore an agonizing decision and is very costly to the individual selecting such an option. It is therefore not to be undertaken lightly without due recognition of the costs involved.

This identification with the poor is essential. It recognizes the fact that the vast majority of persons living today are margined. These persons are really poor. It takes cognizance of the fact that, while many are concerned with affluence and have sold themselves to the god of affluence, even equating this affluence with the God of the Scriptures, affluence still eludes the vast majority of people today. It also takes cognizance of the fact that God is consistently represented in the Scriptures as being on the side of the poor. Ronald Sider makes this point and insists on the necessity of this identification with the poor, and of giving real assistance to them. He says:

God's concern for the poor is astonishing and boundless. At the pivotal points of revelation history, Yahweh was at work liberating the oppressed. We can only begin to fathom the depth of his

identification with the poor disclosed at the Incarnation. Frequently the poor are his special chosen instruments of revelation and salvation. His passion for justice compels him to obliterate rich societies and individuals that oppress the poor and neglect the needy. Consequently, God's people - if they are indeed his people - follow in the footsteps of the God of the poor.⁴

Sider says elsewhere in commenting on I John 3:17-18:

What do they mean for Western Christians who demand increasing affluence each year while Christians in the Third World suffer malnutrition, deformed bodies and brains - even starvation? The text clearly says that if we fail to aid the needy, we do not have God's love - no matter what we may say. It is deeds that count, not pious phrases and saintly speeches. Regardless of what we do or say at 11.00 A. M. Sunday morning, affluent people who neglect the poor are not the people of God.⁵

The words are strong but they argue well for the type of radical commitment that is necessary if the implications of faith in Jesus Christ are to be lived out. There must be identification with the poor, both as an expression of solidarity, as well as a radical commitment to the destruction of evil. This is an indispensable component of the Christian faith. The identification with the poor is a project of such magnitude as to call forth effective action in that sphere where it matters most: the political.

Political Involvement

The insistence on the necessity of involvement in the political arena is also a correct one. Since it is in this arena that decisions are taken, decisions which affect the lives of individuals within nation states and the economic relations of countries, it is essential that the high moral and ethical standards of the Christian faith be infused into this arena. Only as politicians are made to realize that there is

⁴Ronald Sider, Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger. (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1977), p. 85.

⁵Ibid., p. 82.

another reality beyond that which they see, that there is the necessity for the elimination of injustice and oppression, only as this becomes true will there be the kinds of radical restructurings that are essential. The church cannot be true to its mission if it attempts to make occasional forays into this arena. It must be there, consistently raising a prophetic voice, calling the powers that be into subjection to that greater power, the lordship of Jesus Christ.

The church must exercise its effective political power to bring about the kind of changes that are necessary, if the project of liberation is to succeed.

PROBLEMS

While there is much value in the system, as indicated above, and while there is much that can be learned from it, it is essential that it be clearly understood that there are significant problems standing in the way of wholesale endorsement.

Its Hermeneutical Framework

While the acceptance of the historical situation has been given high points, it is only rated highly as one element of the movement. A significant problem arises when it is recognized that the movement accepts this as the starting point for the construction of its theology. As has been indicated, this approach is an interesting one but it is also a radical departure from the usual way of doing theology. This departure is not one that can receive commendation. Theology, to be valid, must reflect upon the revelation of God given in Scriptures and must seek to show how this revelation impinges upon all of life. It cannot start from life to the

Word, or start from life and neglect the Word, as often happens in liberation theology.

It is recognized that this beginning in the historical situation, this employment of a situational hermeneutics, is one of the most significant problems of the movement and one of its greatest dangers. Costas recognizes that there are dangerous consequences flowing from this approach. He says:

If the insistence of the theology of liberation on the necessity of taking seriously the concrete historical situation as a primary frame of reference is its greatest merit, it is also its greatest danger. For it insists on the situation as the "text" on which theology, understood as a critical reflection on the present historical praxis, is grounded. The Bible, tradition, the teaching of the church, history or doctrine, etc., are secondary frames of reference. The historical situation is, in other words, the only normative element in the hermeneutics of the theology of liberation.⁶

In the theology of liberation, the witness of Scripture takes a secondary place, following the revelation given in the historical process. It does not assume the role of leader in theological reflection, but stands in line, behind the existential situation. Says Stephen Knapp:

With some continuity, certainly, with the traditional Roman Catholic thought, and with help as well from some distinctive emphases of contemporary theology ("the church for others," the anthropological trend in theology, etc.) Gutierrez develops a consistent though piecemeal view of revelation which gives revelatory character to the historical engagement of the believer in the world and in the historical praxis of the church and only secondarily the Bible or tradition. Correspondingly, the scientific analysis of reality that informs historical praxis becomes all the more determinative in terms of the "substance" of theological reflection. Hermeneutics becomes "political hermeneutics."⁷

Knapp continues by indicating that there are a number of significant

⁶Costas, *ibid.*, p. 251.

⁷Stephen G. Knapp, "A Preliminary Dialogue with Gutierrez' A Theology of Liberation" *Evangelicals and Liberation*, Carl E. Armerding, ed., (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), pp. 17,18.

problems attending the acceptance of the historical situation as the starting point, and from according Scriptures a secondary place in reflection. There is too great a dependence on the Marxist tools of analysis, and too little credence given to the witness of the Scriptures. The use of the Marxist analysis rather than the witness of Scriptures places the movement in the position of requiring acceptance of a Marxist model by the capitalists whom they are trying to convince of error, a quite unlikely outcome.⁸

Faulty hermeneutics is also reflected in the fact that enough place is not given to the total witness of Scripture. This has been reflected in the examination of liberation, eschatology and politics. Only a selective handling of Scripture can produce the conclusion that spiritual liberation is on par with economic liberation. The universalistic teaching implicit in the movement does great injustice to the constant invitations to repentance and personal faith as necessary prerequisites to salvation. Eschatology is neither only realized, nor is it a human project. Believers exult in a present fulfilment, yet anticipate a future inbreaking by the Creator of the cosmos. Politics, an activity in which all persons are involved, is not presented in Scripture as an item of priority. Believers are commanded to evangelize (Matt. 28:19,20; Acts 1:8), and to pray for and be submissive to those in authority (I Tim. 2:1-14; Rom. 13:1-7). Nowhere in Scripture are believers urged to rise up against rulers and social classes. Scripture does not urge violent political activity, even for good.

⁸Ibid., pp. 21-26.

The movement loses many valuable points by overstatement and excess. Much of its call is legitimate but where Scripture does not support the measure of commitment or the radical view presented, the movement fails to secure commitment to that which is right.

While much can be learned from the social sciences and while it is essential that all people listen to the present existential situation, liberation theology gives too great a place to these in reflection and in the formulation of praxis. Without these tools an essential window on human reality would be missing. It would be impossible to understand the present situation and to determine how to respond and how to plan. Liberation theology is correct in listening to the social sciences. It is incorrect, however, in that it fails to recognize the limitations implicit in the disciplines. All human disciplines are prone to wander from the revealed will of God. They must be constantly brought back to the judgment bar of God's Word. If they fail to receive the Divine imprimatur, they must be rejected. The high place accorded the social sciences puts them outside the pale of this judgment. Liberation theology fails at this point because it does not give primacy to the Word of God.

Its Priorities

Another significant problem with the movement is the placement of its priorities. In the matter of liberation much is made of the multifaceted nature of the project. Examination of the works of the proponents indicates, however, that a greater stress is placed in the politico-economic aspect. The spiritual element takes a back seat and there is, in some respects, a basic assumption that all have entered into this aspect of freedom. This universalistic tendency fails to conform to the witness of Scripture, which indicates the necessity for personal, individual commitment to Jesus Christ

as the means to achieving salvation.

The movement also errs in placing political action at the forefront of the church's mission. When the church transforms its mission into a purely political one, it loses sight of its essential mission and presents a distorted picture of that which Christ came and died to provide. The constant witness of Scripture is that He died to give forgiveness from sins and reconciliation to God. This must be the central feature of any gospel proclamation. Any movement that neglects this is not worthy of the name Christian. The Christian, in surrender to God, selects his priorities correctly and has a correct estimate of the destiny God has planned for those who remain true to Him.

Inadequate Vision of Human Destiny

The movement is in revolt against the view that things will be better in some future eschatological time. Such a view postpones the necessary improvement of the human situation and is not acceptable to liberation theology. The demand is for a radical commitment to change now and liberation theology sees this activity as a pressing necessity. The human lot must be improved in present time.

The struggle continues but the fruit is not yet realized. Those who have heard the message of liberation long after this most pleasing prospect but it has not yet been achieved. It is not to be postponed but it is not here. The vision has been conceived but no birth has yet taken place. The struggle must continue until the oppressor is brought low and the classless society emerges. This is the vision possessed by the liberationist.

Clearly, human destiny is to involve constant struggle until

a point of victory is attained. While the movement promises present alleviation of human alienation and oppression, it is obvious that the fruit can only be realized in some future time as a result of struggle. So liberation theology speaks against the "pie-in-the-sky, against the future unfolding of the divine promises, yet calls to a present commitment to a harsh struggle that can only bear fruit in the future. Man is robbed of that which is sure, the eschatological hope, and receives that which is vague and as yet unrealizable, the struggle for the classless society. The vision of human destiny presented by liberation theology is inadequate. Human destiny will reach its high point of fulfilment in the eschatological ages, when God ushers in and brings to pass the things He has designed. Any project that would rob man of this hope is anti-Christ and must be rejected.

An Indigenous Theology?

One of the key motivating factors behind liberation theology was the felt need for the articulation of a theology that was truly reflective of the Latin American scene. This theology should not ape Europe but should spring out of the adulthood of the Latin American church. Liberation theology was conceived as a means of gaining the attention of the world wide ecclesiastical community.

Liberation theology is recognized as a Latin American development precisely because it enunciated goals and methods that had not been stated by theology up to the point of the inception of liberation theology. It arises out of the Latin American context and seeks to address and correct the problems existing in that situation. This distinctive starting point marks the theology as Latin American, not European. Another distinctive feature is the radical commitment to change, involving the use of force, if necessity so dictates.

The movement can be characterized as Latin American because its leading proponents are Latin American. These thinkers represent a number of Latin American countries and come from Roman Catholic and Protestant ranks. The movement is not a one country, one church phenomenon.

While it has to be admitted that there is something distinctively Latin American about the movement, it must also be recognized that there are elements that are not distinctive. In the discussion of the historical development of the movement it was pointed out that the movement passed through various phases, from secularization to European political theology to developmentalism and then to liberation theology. Liberation theology has its roots in these movements and owes its development to many seminal thoughts found in them.

Marxist ideology is an essential component in liberation theology. The Marxist analysis of society and the Marxist methodology are key elements. Marxism is not a Latin American development. The dependence upon this tool makes at least this element a transplant rather than an indigenous development.

Any reading of the major representatives of the movement will reveal the fact that there is heavy dependence on European theologians. This is clearly seen in the numerous quotations employed. The movement is not self-contained, not original, but does depend upon other sources, principally European theology.

The movement is indigenous only to the extent that it has emerged out of the Latin American context, is articulated by Latin American theologians, and is designed to meet the situation in Latin America.

CONCLUSION

The theology of liberation plays a vital role in calling the church back to an emphasis on certain dimensions that have been missing from its contemporary witness. It calls the church back to a radical commitment to a project in history that seeks to free the oppressed from the shackles of oppression and release them to a new freedom. Without this radical commitment to the historical project, the church ceases to be salt.

The theology of liberation, however, is in error at certain significant points. One may borrow from the movement. One may learn its significant lessons. One may not, however, adopt its system completely and trust to remain in the mainstream of evangelical Christianity.

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