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An Essay on Liberation Theology

Theology of Christian Missions

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lib-er-a-tion the-ol-o-gy *noun*

Catholic movement championing the oppressed: a movement in Roman Catholic religious teaching that argues that the Church should work actively to combat social, political, and economic oppression. The movement is international but especially active in Latin America and bases its case on Jesus Christ's ministry to the poor and outcast in society. (Encarta)

Liberation theology is most often associated with Latin America, but is actually a family of theologies that includes Latin Americans, Blacks, and some feminist groups. (Rhodes) The focus of this paper will be on the movement in Latin America, which gained strength in there during the 1970s. Traditionally both the Roman Catholic and the Protestant churches have opposed liberation theology.

Liberation theology seeks "to apply religious faith by aiding the poor and oppressed through involvement in political and civic affairs." (EB) Followers of this theology attack the socioeconomic structures themselves. Participants take an active role in bringing the "problem" structures to an end. Most often capitalism is the socioeconomic structure that they target.

The birth of liberation theology is usually dated to the second Latin American Bishops' Conference in Medellin, Colombia in 1968. (EB) This theology springs from a Catholic tradition most often, although one finds roots in Protestantism, also. Theological roots of Latin American liberation theology are found in the works of Jurgen Moltmann, Johannes Baptist Metz, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer." (Rhodes) In December 1971 Gustavo Gutiérrez published *Teología de la liberación*. (Boff) This work gave a voice to the movement of liberation theology. The movement could move forward because its followers had an authoritative work to point toward in the face of opposition.

Liberation theologians approach the Bible with the view that "God speaks particularly through the poor and that the Bible can be understood only when seen from the perspective of the poor." (EB) They adopt a Marxist view of social analysis. Marxism

understands that the original happiness and tranquility of society was disturbed by the rise of economic classes. The upper classes sought to oppress the lower classes in order that the upper could attain even more success. Marx held that this oppression is the root of all of man's problems. Marx upheld capitalism as an example of this type of oppression. (Rhodes) Liberation theologians, too, see capitalism as the root of the oppression of the poor in Latin America.

Comunidades de base, or base communities, are the basic units of those who advocate liberation theologies in Latin America. The base communities are comprised of 10 to 30 members. Members study the Bible and strive to meet the other members' present needs of food, water, sewage disposal, and electricity. (EB) They see their fellow man's need and do something about. This is their starting place: action.

Those who oppose liberation theology contend that they have interpreted the Bible through a very slanted bias. Critics point to improper methodology as their theological error. The hermeneutic of liberation makes praxis its first step, which is in turn followed by theological study. Praxis derives from the Greek *prasso*, which means, "to work." Praxis is action on behalf of the poor and oppressed. Theology will emerge from this action, but not before the action has commenced. In regard to scriptural interpretation, the mind of the interpreter becomes the authority instead of the Scripture itself. The reader decides what the author meant in particular passages and that is newly labeled as 'authority.' This 'authoritative' interpretation is then applied to current, actual situations. This is the hermeneutic of liberation theology. Gustavo Gutiérrez articulates that "theology is not just be learned; it is to be done." (Rhodes)

Christians who question liberation theology posit that they must know what God is mandating in Scripture before they can act on it. In this way a Christian is able to

conduct his or her life based on the “objective, propositional revelation found in Scripture.” (Rhodes)

One of the actions done in the name of liberation theology that Catholics and Protestants find so hard to rationalize is the practice of killing those who oppress. Bishop Hoyos says, “When I see a church with a machine gun, I cannot see the crucified Christ in that church. We can never use hate as a system of change. The core of being a church is love.” (Rhodes) It is this bloodshed that has brought many to rethink liberation theology.

According to Rhodes a revival that is more rooted in the Bible is taking place in Latin America among those who have subscribed to this theology. Rhodes goes on to say that there “seems to be more interest in spiritual disciplines – such as prayer, devotions, exercising faith, and fellowshiping with other believers.” The recent explosion of Protestantism within Latin America may also be a cause of this type of revival. Since the late 1960s, there has been an increase from 15 million Protestants to 40 million, which is 10 percent of the Latin American population.

Christians must not choose the other extreme and deny the scriptural basis for aiding the poor, oppressed, orphaned, and widowed. Both the Old and New Testaments give clear instructions for caring for the oppressed and needy.

“When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God.”

Leviticus 19:9-10

“I know that the LORD secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy.”

Psalms 140:12

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give

you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go visit you?' 'The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'"

Matthew 25:35-40

"So he [an expert in the law] asked Jesus, 'Who is my neighbor?' [A Jewish man is beaten. A priest and a Levite pass the man. A Samaritan man has compassion on him and cares for him. (paraphrase mine) Jesus asks,] 'Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?' The expert in the law replied, 'The one who had mercy on him.'"

Luke 10:29f

Clearly God's people are to attend to the poor and oppressed in this world.

However, Christians must always take their action after they have evaluated the whole of Scripture.

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