

LIBERATION THEOLOGY

By

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Liberation theology is that concept that the gospel of Christ should liberate man from physical and material problems such as poverty and political oppression. It urges the church to become involved in politics even to the supporting of revolutionary guerillas in the overthrow of “oppressive” governments.

Of course, there is some truth in it. We Christians have the responsibility to give food, water, clothing to the needy, to visit the sick and the prisoners and we often fail miserably. But liberation theology takes one much farther. It puts the emphasis of the good news on the physical and the material, on the **now**, the relieving of temporal burdens and tribulations. It reverses Paul’s admonition to “set your mind upon things that are above and not upon thing upon the earth” (Col. 3:2). The blessed hope becomes a hope of better housing, the hope of a higher standard of living, and hope that one may escape the trials which the Bible says are for our ultimate good.

The socialists repeatedly have accused Christians of a “pie in the sky” attitude. We are accused of saying to the poor “endure your chains, your poverty, your oppression. You will have your reward in heaven.” This, they say, is just another means of keeping the poor in their place. They point to the great number of poor in the world and say, “How can you think of future rewards when present needs are so great?”

They see the “good news” as a promise of better living conditions, a change in the political structure, freedom from political oppression and a redistribution of the wealth, not in the sense of Christian charity, but by political force. This is liberation theology. It serves to rally the masses of people who give lip-service to Christ, and inspire them to revolution such as that which is taking place in El Salvador, and such as religious leaders are advocating in all of Latin America. [Reference deleted by KF, as it is no longer available to examine.]

The freedom Jesus preached was not a political freedom. He refused to support the Zealots in their effort to overthrow the Roman invaders. He clearly denied any claim to an earthly kingdom. He neither offered the hope of material wealth nor denounced the Roman system. He refused the request of the man who demanded, “Bid my brother divide the inheritance with me.” In feeding the multitudes with fish and bread He did not disturb the wealthy, but provided from His own power. When Judas suggested that Mary’s expensive ointment should be turned to cash and distributed to the poor he was rebuked by the Lord. Charity must be voluntary.

Liberation theology is not the good news of the Bible. The good news Christ preached was not custom-made to meet a special need of man in a particular age or setting. It is not designed for a particular group such as the poor or the politically oppressed. Rather, it meets the basic need of all mankind in all ages and all circumstances, because it deals with the fundamental issue of man’s being, of his very existence.

To Abraham, God had promised to bless all families of the earth through Christ (Gen. 12:1-4, Gal. 3:16). When Jesus came He immediately began to show that He was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophesy, his healing of only a few who were sick

and His giving sight to a few blind people served to prove that He fulfilled the prophets (Luke 4:18–19, 20:17–18, Matt 22:41–45). But His message was not one of socio-economic and political conditions, nor a promise of relief from persecution, poverty, or other burdens common to most mankind. His message was not one of social revolution but of spiritual restitution to God. He began His ministry with the words, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

God’s purpose ought to be man’s purpose, and that purpose is the basis of Christ’s coming to the world. God did not send His Son into the world for social and political liberation, but rather that “whosoever believes on him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” Man that perishes in judgment is a failure, no matter how he lived, whether rich or poor, moral or immoral. Improving condition in this world will be of little benefit to those who, at the final hour, are sentenced to perish with the world in the fire of II Peter 3:7—10. According to John, the whole world is in the power of the evil one (I John 5:19), because until people repent and submit themselves to Christ they are enslaved to Satan. The object of the gospel is that we might be “redeemed out of this present evil world” (Gal. 1:4). This is liberation. One gives up temporal life to gain permanent life. He counts this life to be of value only to the extent that it contributes to the eternal for himself and for others. Jesus said man is to labor not for that which perishes but for that which is eternal.

Liberation theology concerns itself with the poor, the hungry, the destitute. Certainly there is nothing wrong with that. Every Christian is thus concerned. But this is not the gospel. Rather it is a result of the gospel. Christ promises to help and provide for those who seek first His kingdom (Matt. 6:33). Liberation theology turns this around and says first we must overcome poverty, tribulation, persecution and oppression, and then, when everything is secure, we will take a look at the kingdom of Christ. Moreover, this philosophy is the seed-bed of revolution and terrorism. However one may invoke the name of Jesus Christ in the spirit of peace when he preaches a liberation theology, the result is that the unconverted masses interpret it as an endorsement of the Marxist philosophy that they have a right to take from the rich by violence and distribute to the poor. Wherever liberation theology goes, violence and bloodshed are not far behind.

The apostles were well acquainted with poverty, political oppression, and social inequality, but the hope they presented had nothing to do with any of these. Theirs was the hope of a resurrection from death to life in a new and perfect creation. As to helping the poor, lifting the fallen, and relieving the burdens of the oppressed they gave an example by their own personal efforts. Collections were taken for the poverty-stricken saints at Jerusalem. The apostles admonished the churches to care for their own widows, orphans, and needy. The love of God is followed by love for one’s neighbor which dictates a concern for that neighbor’s needs. Yet the apostles taught us not to rebel at affliction in this world, since it adds weight to the crown of glory in the next (II Cor. 4:17).

The hope as expressed in the new Testament is realistic in contrast to the vague concepts usually expressed in the name of the Christian religion. It is hardly any wonder that people in underdeveloped countries are so quick to grasp at the Marxist promise of a better life here and now when the only religious hope they have been given is for their spirits to live in some kind of never-never land totally unlike anything that one understands as the life God created.

The hope of the gospel is not for the spirit to fly off to heaven at the moment of death but for the whole person to be resurrected into a full-orbed life. Jesus warned that God is “able to destroy both body and soul in Gehenna” (Matt 10:28). In the judgment the whole person perishes. The good news also has to do with the whole person, body and soul. The whole being is to be resurrected because the total penalty of death has been met through Jesus. “For our citizenship is in heaven from whence we wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall fashion anew the body of our humiliation, that it may be conformed to the body of His glory according to the working whereby He is able even to subject all things unto Himself” (Phil. 3:20–21).

The hope Jesus preached and demonstrated by His won experience is the hope of coming forth from the state of death as a human being — body and all — to live forever. As Paul described the corruption and “suffering of this present time” he said that we “groan within ourselves, waiting for our adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body” (Rom. 8:18–23). A Christian is one whose citizenship is in the kingdom of heaven and his hope is for a resurrection to a new and glorious life in the new creation after the present world has been destroyed (II Peter 3:10–13). Therefore he sits loose from the world, does not put his confidence in worldly things nor seek to amass worldly wealth. He is able to share with those with less because his “life consists not in the abundance of the things which he possesses” (Luke 12:15).

The good news is not that Christ liberates us from the hardships and inequalities of the world but that He liberates us from the condemnation of the world. The world is temporal, condemned and sentenced to perish. All the wicked, like the tares after harvest, are to be gathered up and burned with fire (Matt. 13:40, 3:12). What Christ does is “deliver us from this present evil world” (Gal. 1:4), and its condemnation.

If there are those in the church whose lives are centered on money, possessions, pleasures, and the prestige of the world, it is because they do not believe or take seriously what the Bible teaches about the world’s condition and ultimate fate.

Christ did not come to die in order to raise material standards of living for all the wicked sinners of the world. He did not die to establish socialist democracies all over the world. The theology of Christianity is that Christ saves man from death by His own death and will give man life through a resurrection from the grave. Those who make this their theology have a victorious view of life, in spite of all circumstances. But much more than that, it is this hope that moves the Christian to live a new life in this world with a deep concern for the welfare of others and a generous desire to help them.

Christ’s disciples are not in the world to reform society but to transform individuals by the power of the gospel — the good news of Christ’s death and resurrection and the life of immortality to come. Transformed persons are liberated, indeed. They are no longer slaves to sin and the world, but are the free Sons of God. Those who live for political and social liberation are slave to a failing and doomed philosophy and even if they gain the world they will lose the greatest blessing of all, eternal life.

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