

**Liberation Theology
and the
New Monastic University Student**

J. Scott Roberts
5-25-04

Instructor: Linda Peacore, Ph.D.
Course: Latin American Theology Independent Study

Abstract

With the rise of socially minded students in the University arenas and traditional evangelical theology's lack of a strong, holistic eujaggevlion, the author intends to draw from the Latin American contribution of Liberation Theology in order to make the words and practice of Christ relevant to an emerging student generation that promises not only to be social conscious and true to the gospel, but also deeply monastic in its focus.

Part 1 - Oppression

Introduction

Setting out to enculturate the gospel message is a task of immense magnitude. To answer the questions of a generation while being true to the good news of Jesus is not a task that should be attempted idly. The inspiration for this research came from an inner desire to understand the emerging student generation and their passion for social change, a passion that exceeds anything seen in the last 20 years. Furthermore, the desire to see a new breed of missionary work occurring in the mega-cities of the world has led to the belief that social change and monasticism are ripe in the University world. My personal involvement in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship's Global Urban Trek to Buenos Aires, Argentina, and numerous conversations with René Padilla have led to a part of the theological world many northern academics consider passé, but which holds a wonderful capacity to revolutionize the Christian faith and make it relevant again to a lost generation.

In order to release the latent energy of today's students for the Kingdom of God, it is necessary to effectively communicate a re-newed theological paradigm that can be grasped, understood and employed to the concerns of students. This paper hopes to provide such a theological basis. As such, it is necessary to begin by providing a basic survey of current trends among the students to which InterVarsity ministers. During the academic years 1999-2003, IVCF actively served approximately 31,000 students on 532 campuses. Of these students, over four thousand have participated in mission projects during the past 2 years, or about 13% of our total student involvement. This is a sharp increase over the academic years of 2000 and 2001 where half those numbers of students were involved. Of those four thousand students, between 79% and 85% are serving in urban work stateside and abroad.

Even more staggering is the percentage increases in the Rocky Mountain Region during these same years. When the national movement recognized an approximate doubling

involvement in mission, the Rocky Mountains realized nearly a quadrupling. Comparing this to the national trend and the interest and desire to serve the poor is apparent.¹

Table 1: Total IVCF Missions Involvement

YEAR	2000	2001	2002	2003
Tot. # Students	30999	32034	31361	31418
Tot. # Students on Global Projects	806	1064	918	685
Tot. # Students on Urban Projects	*	*	1694	1684
Tot. # Students on Urban Plunges	1730	1025	1610	1724
Tot. % Students involved in above	8.2	6.5	13.5	13
# Students on Trek/# Commitments to 2 yrs service	--	83/40	60/30	98/30

* Data for this Year is included in the Global Projects Numbers.
 -- The Trek was not in existence this year.

Table 2: Rocky Mountain Region Missions Involvement

YEAR	2000	2001	2002	2003
Total # Students	1157	1188	1037	1099
Total # Students on Missions	101	64	161	256
% Students Involved	8.7	5.4	15.5	23.3

The past few years have seen students flocking to the poor. Why the sudden interest? What is the motivation for racial reconciliation, urban service and the commitments of students to dedicate themselves to two plus years of service in these fields upon graduation? While no exhaustive study has been conducted, it is this author's opinion that the economic promises of the eighties and nineties have not materialized, the realization that the world is worse off today than it was 20 years ago and the lackadaisical attitude of the older generation in caring for humanity has led many students to abandon the "American Dream" in search of a truly humanitarian dream: one found in loving your neighbor and sacrificing for the sake of others.

¹ Data from Internal IVCF Records, available upon request.

These decisions, by young adults today, have the potential to create a new wave of Christ followers that will explode upon the scene and radically impact the world. *If* they can see that Jesus is relevant to the issues they are facing, *then* it is here that Liberation Theology can begin to bridge the gap between world issues, personal involvement and following God. Students, today, are concerned with malnutrition, racism, slavery, social inequality and oppression; and it is these questions that Liberation Theology addresses. The following are a sample of the questions that this paper intends to address: *How does liberation theology define oppression? Where do we find the oppressed? Who are the oppressed? How does this understanding of oppression relate to social justice?*

Oppression

Oppression is commonly defined in terms of violence and/or injustice. The American Heritage Dictionary defines *oppression* as the act of subjugating or persecuting another by unjust or tyrannical use of force or authority, which results in depressing the mind or spirit and/or overwhelming or crushing its object.² Liberation Theology accepts this definition of oppression but is not limited to it when a concrete situational analysis is performed. The Liberationists look not only at the oppressor and the victim but also at the structure of a society that leads to intentional or unintentional oppression. Frequently, but not always, in Liberation Theology an economic policy, disparity or agenda is fueling an oppressive situation. To some, this oppression is equated with idolatry, which the Scriptures repeatedly condemn. By making the link between oppression, economics and idolatry, the Liberationists gain much support from the Old and the New Testaments.³

Sin and Oppression

² *American Heritage Dictionary*, ed. William Morris, Second College ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982).

³ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993). Pg. 185-6.

If oppression is equated with idolatry, and idolatry with sin, then oppression is necessarily the concrete action that manifests the act of sinful behavior. Traditional theology has defined sin from the point of view of the individual.⁴ One such example is taken from Ryrie, who defines sin as ‘anything against the character of God,’⁵ and while his systematic theology fails to mention structural sin, oppression, our brothers and sisters in Latin America have helped to open our eyes to places where the character of God stretches beyond personal action into corporate function. If, as Sobrino posits, the Kingdom of God is the reign and rule of God,⁶ then God’s character will be an essential part of that reign. Anywhere that the Kingdom is missing, the character of God is also missing, whether personal, corporate or institutional.

While none of the Liberationist readings surveyed⁷ explicitly deny individual sin, their focus is heavily weighted to structural and institutional sin of which individuals are a part – naïvely and intentionally. It is because of this equation,

Sin = corporate and/or institutional oppression

that the remedy for sin, commonly referred to as salvation can be written,

salvation = liberation from oppression.

Salvation can take many forms depending on the liberation required – for the economically oppressed it may be the creation of jobs, new economic market models, redistribution of wealth, etc. while for racism or ethno-centrism it may be affirmative action and so on. However, the question tantamount to any liberation, salvation, that is proposed by the theological practitioner must always be two-fold: “Is this changing the system, or working within it?” and “Which is more beneficial in the long run for the salvation of all people?”

Who are the Oppressed?

⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan, 1994). Pg. 490 states, “Sin includes not only individual acts...but also attitudes...” Note the emphasis on individuality, furthermore, nowhere in this work is structural sin addressed.

⁵ Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Victor Books, 1981). Pg. 212

⁶ Sobrino. Pg. 71.

⁷ See Bibliography for complete listing of Books and articles researched.

If it is known that oppression is some form of inequality, and that oppression is sin, then the next logical question must be, "Who are the Oppressed, the ones sinned against?" Without answering this question the link between the relevance of Liberation Theology and the university student cannot be made since it is my desire to show how the students' concerns are addressed by and informed from the Scriptures. Furthermore, without identifying who is sinned against, it is impossible to determine who or what is sinning, in order for their repentance and salvation to be secured. If the antagonist isn't identified, then it becomes impossible to do as Paul instructed and restore the sinner from his actions (Gal 6:1), hence repealing the oppressive, sinful situation.

Therefore, Liberationists define the oppressed as those who suffer any combination of the following: physical, social, economic, emotional, moral and/or religious poverty. "The poor are all those who, bodily or spiritually, live on the margins of death and to whom life has given nothing...all those who suffer violence and injustice without being able to defend themselves from these...this is opposed to the *oppressor, violent*, those who oppress the poor and reduce them to penury in order to enrich themselves at their expense."⁸ Concretely speaking, the oppressed are the majority peoples of the world who live in extreme poverty. In Latin America, these are the inhabitants of the slums or *villa miserias* as they are known in Argentina. They are the rural dwellers that suffer long working hours in order to enrich the landowners. They are frequently, but not always, the indigenous peoples of their respective countries.

In the following pages, three aspects of oppression will be examined including those who are held in its grasp. These three each relate to the concerns of the modern day student: The oppression of basic life, the oppression of culture/ethnicity and the oppression of women.

The Oppression of Basic Life

⁸ Moltmann IN Sobrino. Pg. 119

In Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church, we find the quote that “to survive, one has to have ‘the power to decide about one’s history and one’s vocation or historical mission,’”⁹ hence oppression would be the inability to decide one’s course upon the seas of life. The question then becomes, “Do I want to be poor, or is this laid upon me by some outside force of which I have no control?” If poverty is not voluntary, then oppression is present. Archbishop Romero was fond of saying, “We have to defend the little thing that is God’s greatest gift: *LIFE*. (emphasis added)”¹⁰

This life is the ability to work, eat and thrive. It is what the United States of America’s Declaration of Independence meant when it said, “All men are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Thus oppression is the lack of life’s basic necessities like food, water, education, employment, housing, etc... These deficits have led Sobrino to define 2 types of people in the world: the oppressors – those who can take life for granted and the oppressed – those who cannot take it for granted and need it to be proclaimed as a historical reality. To illustrate the point, he points to the plethora of examples in which Jesus alludes to life’s basic necessities: food, bread, and water. It was these things Jesus used to illustrate the freedom and plenty of the Kingdom of God.¹¹

An illustration from the Scripture: in Luke 14:15-24, the Kingdom is compared to a Great Banquet in which those who have plenty reject the invitation of the Host to celebrate and eventually those who are the destitute, the homeless, ‘the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame’ are all brought in to celebrate and have their fill. Meanwhile those with plenty, because of their refusal to enter into the banquet and leave their baggage – their real estate, their pleasures, their toys and commune with the King, are expelled and never able to enter into the celebration. According to the liberationist hermeneutic, the ones with plenty are not in need of more, although all their excuses show a desire for self-fulfilled greed, while the poor are willing to come and

⁹ Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Yolanda Tarango, *Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992). Pg. 4

¹⁰ Sobrino. Pg. 84

¹¹ Ibid. pg. 85

share what the master has. It is particularly noteworthy that Jesus draws out the bottom of society – the unclean, those considered less human – and exalts them to the level of banquet guests, while contrasting them with the aristocracy – those able to purchase and live well – who are condemned.

It is this stand, this *'preferential option for the poor'* that leads many liberationists to focus on the social and economic sides of oppression while believing that moral, emotional, religious and physical oppression are effects or byproducts of this socio-economic situation. The author believes this to be a simplistic view while conceding that in the Latin American context the situation could easily be seen from this perspective. However, living in the United States of America, there are plenty of examples of wealthy people oppressed with psychic problems, and there are plenty of social elites suffering moral bankruptcy.

From the vantage point of many liberationists, it is fair to say that those who suffer economic and social oppression tend to also suffer the others as symptoms: economic poverty leads to unhealthy living conditions which result in moral compromises in order to survive; and these in turn lead to religious and psychic trauma. The growing prostitution trade is one example of economic poverty leading families to sell their daughters into the brothel in order for the remainder of the family to survive.

The Oppression of Cultural and Ethnic Superiority

A few people have taken ideas from liberation theology and applied them to culture and ethnicity. The following quote, although applied to the modern mission enterprise, is apropos, “a thin line has been crossed when nationalism and patriotism lead us to demonize people and nations as enemies of our own nation.”¹² In *Castrating Culture*, Dewi Hughes agrees with this premise when he defines *empire building* as imposing ‘the will of one ethnic identity on others by

¹² Samuel Escobar, *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone*, ed. David Smith, Christian Doctrine in Global Perspective (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003). pg. 60.

force.’ Furthermore, the political "philosophy that has been dominant in Europe since the end of the eighteenth century...justifies the repression of minorities in the interest of state unity and individual freedoms."¹³

Samuel Escobar concludes that in Latin America the conquering Spanish believed that enlarging their territory was synonymous with ‘enlarging the Kingdom of God.’¹⁴ A very similar theory exists among United States conservatives that the Kingdom of God is synonymous with Capitalism and Democracy, although capitalism is always given precedence. Thus oppression can be viewed as cultural genocide. Justo González aptly recognizes this when he states, “‘culture’ is the entire set of values and standards that the ruling groups set up in order to authenticate their own power and to keep the rest subservient. ‘Culture’ develops at the high point of power of a nation or a group.”¹⁵

Classically, ethnic/cultural oppression has been found among missionaries and is exhibited in the exportation of church services, buildings, theology and even music. The clearest example is the three-self principle common for many years among missionaries – that churches should be self-funding, self-propagating and self-governing, but not self-theologizing. However, the rise of *tolerance* doctrines in Universities is leading to the adoption and acceptance of multiple cultural forms. This rise may be just what is needed in order to adopt a new monastic movement among students who will incarnate among the culture of poverty in order to bring its hardships to the recognition of the minority public. One such example is Word Made Flesh, a monastic protestant group whose communal values celebrate Intimacy, obedience, humility, community, service, simplicity, submission, brokenness and suffering. It may be noteworthy that the average age of Word Made Flesh’s members is between 24-28 years old.

¹³ Dewi Hughes, *Castrating Culture: A Christian Perspective on Ethnic Identity from the Margins* (Glasgow: Paternoster Press, 2001). Pg. 1-2

¹⁴ Escobar. Pg. 48

¹⁵ Justo González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990). Pg. 37-38

Therefore, culture is the expression of one group claiming superiority to those around it and while culture can be liberating, it may also be used to oppress. Hughes illustrates this phenomenon with many sad but insightful examples, many from his own Welsh background amidst the English occupation. How many more could be written from the indigenous peoples perspective in North and South America alone?

The Oppression of Women

Liberation theology does not explicitly concern itself with the problem of gender and its related violence, especially since classic Liberation Theology is concerned with a preferential option for the poor – specifically the economic poor. However, the ideology and methodology of liberation has been applied to feminine issues. In some cases, the results are a far cry from the evangelicals' infatuation with dogma, as in *Hispanic Women*¹⁶ where the authors interview numerous Latinas about their conception of theology, God and the need to be freed. In short, these women are concerned with taking 'what is life giving, what is important for the struggle for survival, and [leaving] what is not relevant or is harmful.'¹⁷ The results are very syncretistic religious traditions, especially when compared to the official teachings of protestant and catholic Christendom. Nevertheless, survival, not orthodoxy, is their concern, and these women recognize it.

On the other hand, in line with a more 'official' hermeneutic, Sarah Sumner's *Men and Women in the Church*¹⁸ while not a liberation theology book, approaches the concept of leadership within the church with many similarities to Liberation Theology's hermeneutic. A cursory reading of her work shows a deep distrust in the traditional readings of biblical texts used to support submission and keep women from using their God given gifts. From this distrust, Dr. Sumner re-interprets many of the classical texts from a view of physical weakness, not

¹⁶ Isasi-Díaz and Tarango.

¹⁷ Ibid. Pg. 66

¹⁸ Sarah Sumner Ph.D., *Men and Women in the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

lessness or inferiority. She ends with the liberating message that women are able to serve and lead within the church. In fact they need to do so in order to have a healthy church full of 'mothers and fathers' in the faith.

Another insightful work is *Through Her Eyes*¹⁹ in which many insightful points are made about the need for female liberation, not least among these is the "Feminization of Poverty in the Modern World." According to a 1980 United Nations Report, one half of the world's population is female and women spend nearly twice the time working as men, receive 1/10 of the world's income and possess less than one percent of the world's wealth.²⁰ This premise allows for a successful use of Liberation Theology's 'preferential option for the poor' to be applied to the poorest of the poor – our female sisters around the world. Working from this perspective, the various authors in this collection of articles argue that only by truly liberating the women of the world, can genuine liberation be found for all people. It is because of this broadened category of the 'poor' that Justo González prefers to use the terms 'preferential option **for-others**,'²¹ which allows for the application of Liberation Theology's principles to more groups than strictly the economically poor.

Part 2 – Hermeneutics

In order to bring Liberation Theology home to students, there must be a means of applying its hermeneutic to the study of Scripture in order to empower those to whom the theology of Liberation would appeal – the oppressed and the student activist. In order to do so, the following questions must be answered: *What is the hermeneutical circle? How is it used? How is it integral to liberation theology's method? What is the role of action in the hermeneutical circle? What is the role of scripture?*

¹⁹ *Through Her Eyes*, ed. Elsa Tamez, trans. various (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989).

²⁰ "Women and the Theology of Liberation" by Ana María Bidegain IN Ibid. pg. 31

²¹ González.

The Hermeneutic of Liberation Theology

While all *traditional* theologies start with the Scriptures and then impose arbitrary grids over the text, the most significant divergence of Liberation Theology is its beginning in the context of the people, particularly the experience of the poor and the struggle of the oppressed. From here liberationists read or re-read the meaning of the Scriptures into today's situation. From this approach, Gutiérrez correctly poses the following question, "What relation is there between salvation and the historical process of the liberation of man?"²²

In order to answer this question, a new way of reading the Scripture must be proposed. '[*First*] there is our way of experiencing reality which leads us to ideological suspicion.' This suspicion must challenge our traditional views of reality and may occur through phenomenological violence or through encounters with other cultures.

"*Second*, there is the application of our ideological suspicion to the whole ideological superstructure in general and to theology in particular. *Thirdly* there comes a new way of experiencing theological reality that leads us to exegetical suspicion, that is, to the suspicion that the prevailing interpretation of the Bible has not taken important pieces of data into account. *Fourthly* we have our new hermeneutic, that is, our new way of interpreting the fountainhead of our faith (i.e., Scripture) with the new elements at our disposal."²³

Fifthly, if I may be allowed to add, the circle is not really a circle at all, but rather it is a spiral continuing to build upon itself and change as the experiences of life continue to shape the reader. Each time we read Scripture, we are bringing the culmination of our experiences, suspicions, new and old hermeneutics to the text, our context determines how we are able to read and understand the meaning of Scripture and so Segundo's fourth point must necessarily be followed by a

²² Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973). Pg. 45

²³ Juan Luis Segundo, "The Hermeneutic Circle," in *Third World Liberation Theologies: A Reader*, ed. Deane William Fenn (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986). Pg. 66

recursive first point.²⁴ But lest all is lost and the main critique that Liberation Theology offers to classical theology be forgotten, the spiral continues on with orthopraxis.²⁵

Orthopraxis is *the* right way of acting and relates ‘to the Hebrew concept of truth, which...takes shape as action and relationships,²⁶ not as knowledge, which is the Greco-Roman concept. According to liberationists, right action is what Christ desired. While orthodoxy focuses on right beliefs, which classicists hope will result in correct action²⁷, the liberationist sees the *context of life* and the fact that these “orthodox” beliefs haven’t changed history for the better. On the contrary, in many countries, “orthodoxy” has allowed for crippling, violent and inhumane governments to continue to rule with the blessing of the Church.²⁸

Use and Integration of the hermeneutic?

By approaching life from the perspective of the economically poor, liberationists begin by asking questions of the current economic policies of their countries, of international business, trade and treaties and of the Church’s role in promoting or hindering these situations. Critical liberationists will then begin rereading the Scriptures asking whether the Bible has important things to say about the topics at hand. But even more than that, since praxis is the final result of discipleship, much attention is devoted to the actions that are performed amidst the culture of the day. It is for this reason that much attention is given to the Exodus Event and to the actions of Jesus or in Sobrino’s case to the actions of Jesus as they relate to the coming Kingdom of God.²⁹

²⁴ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991).

²⁵ Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for Our Time*, trans. Patrick Hughes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978). Pg. 43-8 offer up a similar hermeneutic with the following additions: 1) Man is always more important than Institutional Church; 2) Utopia is more important than Fact; 3) Social must reign over the personal.

²⁶ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christology - a Global Introduction: An Ecumenical, International and Contextual Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003). Pg. 225

²⁷ See Ryrie. Pg. 9 for a discussion of theology being simply a expressing thoughts about God versus Gutierrez’ idea that “theology must be man’s critical reflection on himself, on his own basic principles,” from Gutiérrez. Pg. 11.

²⁸ Boff. Pg. 46-7

²⁹ Sobrino.

As new insight is gleaned, as proof of the system supporting the status quo arises, then new theologies are developed and new doctrines that support new praxis are initiated. However the uncritical liberationists, which I believe is why so many minority world oppressors³⁰ oppose this theology, see the problems and seek solutions from Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology or in economic theories, like Marxism or Socialism and finally seek to prove their solutions from the Scripture. This hermeneutic while acceptable in many parts of the world, is eisegesis and sounds alarms to those brought up under a Greco-Roman philosophy. I do not intend to say that these solutions are invalid or inherently flawed, rather I am simply making the point that this hermeneutic violates Liberation theology's efficacy.

Without approaching theology from the vantage point of the economically impoverished, theology would never seek to determine the relevance of God, the Scriptures, Jesus and the Kingdom to the economic marketplace primarily and to social structures at large. It is this starting point along with its focus on praxis that makes liberation theology unique among the classic theologies. Liberation Theology sees sin, oppression, as the selfish pursuit of things.³¹ Furthermore, salvation involves loving Christ and loving involves orthopraxis. Liberationists believe that salvation should be present in this world, while not negating the next, the focus is much heavier for the present.³²

The Role of Scripture

After much investigation and reflection, the author believes that liberation theologians and classical theologians share a very high regard for Scripture and appeal to it as the basis for their actions on the one side or their knowledge on the other. While classicists may claim that no

³⁰ These oppressors are not limited to governmental rulers, but may also be found among clergy, business professionals, military members, etc...

³¹ See John Zizioulas' *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985 regarding Communion Christology for possible parallels.

³² See Jürgen Moltmann's numerous writings concerning Messianic Christology for possible parallels.

preconceived ideas are present in their search or that they simply want to be faithful to interpreting what the text really says³³, anyone who truly believes that their life experiences aren't shaping their readings and understandings is naïve at best. The role of Scripture is clearly set out in many liberation theologies: to re-interpret salvation from the perspective of the poor who need not only future salvation, but also present salvation from poverty, hunger, disease, etc...

James Cone, in *A Black Theology of Liberation*, wonderfully articulates the reason for theology. Theology's 'sole reason for existence' is to put into ordered speech the meaning of God's activity in the world.³⁴ Scripture, therefore, is the primary means of seeking God's activity in the world. Contrary to many evangelical interpretations of the inerrancy of Scripture, as this author understands it, liberationist while appealing to Scripture for orthopraxis are willing to engage the modern scientific study of Scripture and use the tools of redaction, form, and tradition criticism in order to seek that right action.³⁵ They clearly articulate their bias for the impoverished and their desire to see them freed, and to this end, Scripture is the medium they use to seek the answers that are found in Jesus' worldly actions.

Part 3 – Salvation and Liberation

With the following understandings that Sin = Oppression and that Scripture is read with a 'preferential option for the poor,' the solution to that sin, salvation is the next realm of pertinent discussion for how Liberation Theology relates to the current student activist. Therefore, the following questions will be explored as they relate to the area of Christology within liberation theology: *How is salvation understood? What categories are part of the notion of? Is liberation*

³³ Numerous examples could be cited, however only one representative example will be given: "Because I believe that theology should be explicitly based on the teachings of Scripture, in each chapter I have attempted to show where the Bible gives support for the doctrines under consideration...I have tried to state the doctrinal positions of this book clearly and to show where in Scripture I find convincing evidence for those positions." From pg. 15-6 of Grudem.

³⁴ IN Segundo. Pg. 81

³⁵ One such example can be found in Boff's *Jesus Christ Liberator*, in reference to the Parable of the dishonest manager. Pg. 35

theology more eschatological than Christological? What are the role of Christ and the role of the Kingdom within liberation theology?

Salvation in Liberation Theology

To try and synthesize the ideas of Salvation found within the Christologies of Liberation Theology is a task of mammoth proportion, especially with the wide net that is cast when one says simply 'liberation,' for there are feminine, black, African, Asian, and numerous other liberation theologies. The Christologies that will be drawn upon in this section are all from Latin America – Leonardo Boff, Jon Sobrino and Gustavo Gutiérrez have been read as texts, while numerous other articles have been read from collections like Bonino's *Faces of Jesus*³⁶ or Ferm's *Third World Liberation Theologies: A Reader*³⁷. Even between these, differences are present with most influence being given to present day corporate salvation for Boff and Gutiérrez and little development of the future aspects, while Sobrino places a lot of energy into developing a future liberation embodied in the final Kingdom of God that is then translated to the present situation.

The Shared Idea of Salvation

All liberation Christologies share a present and corporate element in their soteriologies. In order to understand this, it is probably good to define 'salvation' from the understanding of the Latin American context. Salvation can best be defined as the total transformation of the system in which oppression is found, for a new system that is radically different and free of oppressed, oppressor and oppression. Salvation from this standpoint is not merely equality, because equality implies the same structure with equal rights, it assumes that those rights are granted

³⁶ *Faces of Jesus: Latin American Christologies*, ed. José Míguez Bonino, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984; reprint, 1985).

³⁷ *Third World Liberation Theologies: A Reader*, ed. Deane William Ferm (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986).

under the system and could be taken away. Rather, salvation is viewed as liberation³⁸ from a system that determines (de-humanization) to a utopia where divinization reigns, where 'man, made in God's image and likeness, has developed to his full potential the love and power of God after the model of Christ.³⁹ In all the liberation Christologies studied, it appears that salvation can best be summed up in this concept of divinization. Tarango and Isasi-Díaz state it this way, "the goal is to establish a new order of relationships in which salvation becomes a reality when there is no domination and alienation."⁴⁰

Because the ideas of non-domination, anti-alienation, relational restoration and deification are found within Latin American Liberation Christology, the present and corporate needs of salvation are stressed heavily over the salvation of the soul commonly preached in the institutional churches across the world. Drawing on the belief that salvation of the soul only occurs when true communion between people is restored, liberationists seek salvation first in the present world and when that is achieved, some believe that salvation in the world to come is guaranteed.

Everyone surveyed discussed the element of salvation from poverty. Economic salvation, in turn, allows for the redemption of health, family, morality, etc... In all of the cases, economic disparity was seen as the root of oppression, hindering true community with each other and hindering many from experiencing LIFE itself. In order to be liberated, the rich must live out a qualitative salvation which is best illustrated from Matthew 25:31-46 and their care of the hungry, thirsty, stranger, prisoner, and needy. Failure of the rich to avail themselves of their finances and provide for those in need will result in damnation before God⁴¹, while salvation for the poor comes

³⁸ Isasi-Díaz and Tarango. Pg. 3

³⁹ J.D. Douglas, Walter A. Elwell, and Peter Toon, "Theosis," in *The Concise Dictionary of the Christian Tradition: Doctrine, Liturgy, History*, Regency Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1989). Pg. 377

⁴⁰ Isasi-Díaz and Tarango. Pg. 78

⁴¹ Gutiérrez. Pg. 151

in their willingness to see God as he truly is and not as he has always been presented – where life circumstance are the result of God’s approval or disapproval on you life.⁴²

Differences in Salvation

While all share similarities, there are some notable differences in approach. Sobrino, while lobbying for a temporal present and corporate salvation does so from the eschatological reality of the Kingdom of God in tandem with the Historical Jesus who sought to bring the eschatological vision to reality in first century Palestine. His development of the Kingdom of God is extremely enlightening and challenging. He believes that one’s understanding of God will define how/what is seen in the Kingdom. Is it a future reward for those who believe or can it be a present reality? Believing God to be active in history today and believing that God rules in his actions then the Kingdom exists to “transform a bad and unjust historical-social reality into a different good and just one...So God’s ‘reign’ is then the positive action through which God transforms reality and God’s ‘Kingdom’ is what comes to pass in this world when God truly reigns.”⁴³ Therefore, although God’s Kingdom will ultimately be realized in the future⁴⁴, it is presently not just a meaningless concept for today, but one that calls for action.

Boff on the other hand, while talking of the kingdom, views salvation and all its corresponding corporate and present manifestations from the perspective of divinization. He sees salvation ultimately as the full realization of God within our human selves. Unfortunately, he is a bit sloppy in his explanation of the concept with statements like, “Jesus was a person who was empty of himself. Hence he could be completely filled by others, whom he received and accepted as they were.”⁴⁵ By expounding the concept it seems that he emphasizes this

⁴² Sobrino. Pg. 97

⁴³ Ibid. Pg. 71

⁴⁴ Ibid. Pg. 114-5

⁴⁵ Boff. Pg. 145

emptiness being so filled up by God, that rather than being body without character and soul, the proverbial zombie, he was actually the realization of full humanity – loving as God himself loves.⁴⁶

Gutiérrez too differs in his approach and belief in salvation. Grounding much of his theology in the Exodus narrative, salvation is redemption from concrete physical suffering. This political liberation affects the whole person, in all areas of socio-economic-politico-religious life.⁴⁷ Salvation is encountering God in history and the human desire to isolate salvation to the spiritual realm is in order to protect our worldly interests. By doing so, we lose ‘salvation.’⁴⁸ Thus Gutiérrez deals ever so limitedly with the future aspect of salvation, although he doesn’t negate that it may or may not exist.

More Eschatological than Christological?

This is hard to answer. If by ‘more eschatological than Christological’ is implied a purely future oriented history that is devoid of any relation to Jesus in the present, then the answer is NO. However, if by eschatological, the actions of Jesus are taken into account as they relate to the ushering in of a new future era, then the answer is YES. The Christologies surveyed, aside from Gutiérrez’s, which is the first attempt at articulating the liberation position, all appear to tie eschatology to Jesus’ actions as the Christ – the one to usher in the Kingdom in the past, the present and the future.

Oppression, Salvation and Social Justice

Given the discussion of oppression and sin, what exactly is the answer to this great evil? Abstractly, many would say – “Jesus,” but concretely and tangibly, the actions needed can best be summed up with two words: *Social Justice*. Defining this term will help to understand why this

⁴⁶ Ibid. Pg. 202, 206, 252

⁴⁷ Gutiérrez. Pg. 155-160

⁴⁸ Ibid. Pg. 177-8

is the concrete solution to liberating the oppressed. "Social justice is the virtue which guides us in creating those organized human interactions we call institutions. In turn, social institutions, when justly organized, provide us with access to what is good for the person, both individually and in our associations with others. Social justice also imposes on each of us a personal responsibility to work with others to design and continually perfect our institutions as tools for personal and social development."⁴⁹ If this is accepted, then

Social Justice = Salvation = Liberation from Oppression.

If the institutions that organize our human interactions are hindering individual growth and life and by extrapolation must therefore be affecting the welfare of all, then social justice demands that we improve upon and perfect them so that the best interests of all individuals are served while at the same time advancing the corporate benefit.

Liberation theology sets out to advance the corporate benefit by providing for the poor majorities, yet even in this they believe that liberation is brought not only to those who need physical survival, but also to the rich who need liberation from inhumane practices, like greed, covetousness, etc... However, Liberation theology frequently speaks of the liberation of both the oppressed and the oppressor from the perspective of the oppressed, claiming that 'only the oppressed are capable of liberating themselves and of liberating the oppressor.'⁵⁰ Thus social justice on one side is the responsibility of everyone and liberation theology won't deny this, however it tends to see the oppressor as too ingrained in the system, benefiting from its excesses, to truly act to obliterate the proverbial hand that feeds the mouth.

In the economic and social spheres, liberation demands that access be given to all people to earn a living and receive a wage that not only provides for subsistence while others live in opulence, but that ensures a minimum level of survival and reserve. This reserve includes but

⁴⁹ The Center for Economic and Social Justice, *Defining Economic Justice and Social Justice*(accessed April 9 2004); available from <http://www.cesj.org/thirdway/economicjustice-defined.htm>.

⁵⁰ Emilio Antonio Núñez C. and William David Taylor, *Crisis and Hope in Latin America...An Evangelical Perspective*, Revised ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library and WEF, 1996). Pg. 255

is not limited to health, shelter and economic stability.⁵¹ The social dimensions include friendships, equal access to courts and trials⁵², protection from abuse⁵³ and familial bonds to name a few. Also in the social realm, cultural and ethnic diversity must be addressed. Systems that exalt one culture or race over another need to be challenged and replaced with alternative systems founded on love and appreciation for all.

Social Justice in this realm demands that we seek the Godly seeds of the Kingdom within each culture and celebrate those things currently advancing the Kingdom but redeem/change those things that hinder the Kingdom from advancing, all while fully articulating the Kingdom from within the culture.⁵⁴ Therefore, social justice demands that wherever we see people being crucified, whether on the cross of economics, religious superiority, ethnic cleansing, moral sacrifice, preventable physical suffering, or psychic manipulation, we must act to defend those incapable of defending themselves. But even more than defending those incapable of defending themselves, we must love others and actively challenge the status quo while creating situations, structures and relationships that engender true Divine love - agape.

Part 4 – Applying Liberation Theology to University Ministry

The University world is a place ripe with ideas, activists and agendas. While many students are concerned with the systemic violence they see in the world, to the typical college student, the oppressed are little more than faces on milk cartons. Media inebriated students are generally calloused to the cries of the oppressed, while they may take some interest in being verbal activists, very rarely will they affect any tangible change in the system. What is needed is a redefinition of who the oppressed are and how a preferential option for the poor can be

⁵¹ United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*(1948, accessed April 27 2004); available from <http://www.unhchr.ch/udhr/lang/eng.htm>. See Articles 23 and 25 which support this and were written in 1948

⁵² Ibid.(accessed). See Articles 6-12

⁵³ Ibid.(accessed). See Article 5

⁵⁴ Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985; reprint, 16th February 2001). Pg. 52-57

incorporated into their worldview. Therefore I propose that a new monastic student population is ready to be born, but this requires drawing Liberation Theology into the locality of students.

Who are the oppressed within reach of typical students and what can they do about it? In order to answer this, college pastors like myself need to open our eyes and look around. Are their groups of people within 1, 5, 10, or 100 miles that are suffering oppression in the economic, political, social, or religious arenas? What are their situations and the realities in which they live? After determining these things, the next question must be asked and answered, "What are we going to do about it?" From this author's experience, personal failure to act will result in the failure to act of those students I seek to influence.

Next the shrewd pastor needs to invite key students along to witness the oppressive situation and the healing being brought, which must be followed by discussions about the realities of the world and the theological underpinnings of the freedom and hope sought. Finally, the students must be exposed to larger situations followed by challenges to learn and act which will eventually result in exposure to the world level of oppression. Any of these points are prime places for discipleship or evangelistic witness to occur and the success of each will be arguably more pronounced and bear more fruit than esoteric discussions over coffee.

Let me illustrate my point with an example from my ministry. As I began to read the writings of Ron Sider, my heart was broken at the lack of knowledge I had on the subject of world poverty and need, this in turn began affecting my theology of money and forced me to explore alternative theologies that answered the questions of stewardship and love of neighbor beyond what the typical protestant church preached and taught. Ultimately this led to a study on liberation theology. During this process, however, I began to share my insights with students and my desire to begin volunteering at a local outreach to the homeless. I invited some students to attend and we began discussing the reasons for homelessness and poverty. As more students became interested, a spring break project was planned to take students to the inner city of

Denver to work with a local congregation among a primarily immigrant Latino neighborhood. This event resulted in the following realization for one of the students:

I entered the house, the smell was putrid and vile. A narrow path wound from the front door to the kitchen and back to what appeared to be the bedroom. On either side of the path was trash, mounds of it—McDonald's wrappers, dog urine, fecal matter, papers, anything and everything you could think of.

The woman who lives here is confined to the indoors, her family abandoned her saying, "you are too old, die on your own." The dog runs free through the house; the city threatened to fine her for not cleaning up her front yard of the animal's excrement. So after cleaning it and spending many days confined to her bed because of the labor, she has quit letting the animal outside. She depends on the Westside Christian Fellowship to bring her food from the local bank each week.

Commenting on her situation, a student said, "I always thought that people were poor because of themselves. They didn't work hard enough, they were lazy, and they didn't graduate high school. But now I know that isn't so. This woman isn't here of her own choice. She has been forced to live this way because of family, age, health and city regulations."

This realization was a true eye-opener, but the easy thing would be to let the student continue to think on the issue and not act. Action, orthopraxis, is a must, hence a challenge was issued to not only recognize the situation but to do something about it, to sacrifice self for another and to ensure that her situation is forever changed.

This is just the beginning, not the end, another group of students already involved in social work are being challenged to spend the summer in Buenos Aires living and working among the urban slum dwellers with a call of at least two plus years post graduation to laboring on behalf of the poor. This is the call to create a new monastic student who longs to bring the true *eujaggevlion*, the good news of the Kingdom of God, to the world. From these experiences, the theological underpinning for the Kingdom of God can be developed and upon their return practical steps to fight sweatshop labor conditions, globalization, etc...can be developed that draw even more students into the fight against structural oppression and sin.

Conclusion

Only when the eyes of man can be truly opened, will the actions of man be forced to make a choice for the status quo or for change. If students are to see the oppressed, we must help to open their eyes, but that begins with our actions and the choices we make – does fashion rule our wardrobe or do fair wages? Does child prostitution affect whether we spend \$5 on a cup of coffee or support an organization laboring to free child prostitutes? Does cheap produce win our pocketbook over or do we demand that tomato pickers in Florida or banana growers in Latin America pay living wages to their employees even at our expense? These are the questions we need to ask of ourselves, for they determine our integrity and whether Jesus the Liberator will be a viable alternative for today's college student.

Does our conscience burn with guilt or are we like the animal kingdom of Wislawa Szymborska's poem⁵⁵?

The buzzard has nothing to fault himself with.
Scruples are alien to the black panther.
Piranhas do not doubt the rightness of their actions.
The rattlesnake approves of himself without reservations.

The self-critical jackal does not exist.
The locust, alligator, trichina, horsefly
live as they live and are glad of it.

The killer-whale's heart weighs one hundred kilos
but in other respects it is light.

There is nothing more animal-like
than a clear conscience
on the third planet of the Sun.

⁵⁵ Wislawa Szymborska, "In Praise of Self-Deprecation," in *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor* by Paul Farmer, California Series in Public Anthropology (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

- American Heritage Dictionary*. Second College ed., ed. William Morris. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982.
- Boff, Leonardo. *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for Our Time*. Translated by Patrick Hughes. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978.
- Douglas, J.D., Walter A. Elwell, and Peter Toon. "Theosis." In *The Concise Dictionary of the Christian Tradition: Doctrine, Liturgy, History*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1989.
- Escobar, Samuel. *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone* Christian Doctrine in Global Perspective, ed. David Smith. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003.
- Faces of Jesus: Latin American Christologies*. Translated by Robert R. Barr, ed. José Míguez Bonino. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984. Reprint, 1985.
- González, Justo. *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990.
- Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology*: Zondervan, 1994.
- Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973.
- Hiebert, Paul. *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985. Reprint, 16th February 2001.
- Hughes, Dewi. *Castrating Culture: A Christian Perspective on Ethnic Identity from the Margins*. Glasgow: Paternoster Press, 2001.
- Isasi-Díaz, Ada María, and Yolanda Tarango. *Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992.
- Justice, The Center for Economic and Social. *Defining Economic Justice and Social Justice*. Accessed April 9 2004. Available from <http://www.cesj.org/thirdway/economicjustice-defined.htm>.
- Kärkkäinen, Veli-Matti. *Christology - a Global Introduction: An Ecumenical, International and Contextual Perspective*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003.
- Núñez C., Emilio Antonio, and William David Taylor. *Crisis and Hope in Latin America...An Evangelical Perspective*. Revised ed. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library and WEF, 1996.

Osborne, Grant R. *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991.

Ryrie, Charles. *Basic Theology*: Victor Books, 1981.

Segundo, Juan Luis. "The Hermeneutic Circle." In *Third World Liberation Theologies: A Reader*, ed. Deane William Feroz, 64-92. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986.

Sobrino, Jon. *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View*. Translated by Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993.

Sumner Ph.D., Sarah. *Men and Women in the Church*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003.

Szyzborska, Wislawa. "In Praise of Self-Deprecation." In *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor by Paul Farmer*, 23. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2003.

Third World Liberation Theologies: A Reader. ed. Deane William Feroz. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986.

Through Her Eyes. Translated by various, ed. Elsa Tamez. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989.

United Nations. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. 1948. Accessed April 27 2004. Available from <http://www.unhcr.ch/udhr/lang/eng.htm>.