



STATEMENT DL-100-1

**CHRISTIAN REVOLUTION IN LATIN AMERICA:
The Changing Face of Liberation Theology
(Part One in a Three-Part Series on Liberation Theology)**

by Ron Rhodes

In 1985, a leader of the conservative wing of the Roman Catholic church in Latin America, Bishop Hoyos, denounced liberation theologians, saying: "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."¹

Theological controversies are often confined to seminary classrooms or theological journals. But the controversy provoked by Latin American liberation theology has been *public* and it has been *worldwide* — involving the Vatican, orthodox and not-so-orthodox priests, lay people, sociologists, socialists, capitalists, economists, government leaders and their military, and much more. Liberation theology has certainly not been the passing fad some analysts thought it would be when it first emerged in the late 1960s.

Strictly speaking, liberation theology should be understood as a *family* of theologies — including the Latin American, Black, and feminist varieties. All three respond to some form of oppression: Latin American liberation theologians say their poverty-stricken people have been oppressed and exploited by rich, capitalist nations. Black liberation theologians argue that their people have suffered oppression at the hands of racist whites. Feminist liberation theologians lay heavy emphasis upon the status and liberation of women in a male-dominated society.

This article, the first of a three-part series on liberation theology, will focus on the Latin American variety — examining its historical roots, growth, doctrine, and present status in the world. Primary emphasis will be on how the movement has changed since its emergence in the late 1960s. In Parts Two and Three respectively, I will examine the Black and feminist varieties.

With a few notable exceptions, Latin American liberation theology has been a movement identified with the Roman Catholic church. For this reason, I shall direct most of my attention to the views of Roman Catholic liberation theologians. First, however, we must become acquainted with the roots of this controversial theology.

EUROPEAN ROOTS

Some of the theological roots of Latin American liberation theology can be traced directly to the writings of certain European theologians. Three of the more notable of these are Jurgen Moltmann, Johannes Baptist Metz, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Without going into detail, Moltmann has suggested that the coming kingdom gives the church a society-transforming vision of reality as opposed to a merely private vision of personal salvation. Metz has emphasized that there is a political dimension to faith, and that the church must be an institution of social criticism. Bonhoeffer has issued a call to redefine religion in a secular context. His theology emphasizes human responsibility toward others, and stresses the value of seeing the world with "the view from below" — the perspective of the poor and oppressed.

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Though liberationists have borrowed from these theologians, they nevertheless charge the European theologians with being "theoretical abstractions, ideologically neutral, [and] neglecting the miserable, unjust present for some 'Christianity of the future.'"² The theological methodology developed by liberation theologians specifically addresses these perceived deficiencies.

MARXIST INFLUENCES

Marxism has also exerted a profound influence on liberation theologians. This should not be taken to mean that they have espoused Marxism as a holistic plan of political action, for they have not. Their interest has been limited to using Marxist categories for *social analysis*.

According to Marx, man once existed in a simple, primitive state. At that time, there was happiness and tranquility. This primitive state of happiness was disrupted, however, by the rise of economic classes where one class sought to oppress and exploit another for its own economic advantage. Marx believed all of man's problems are the direct result of this class exploitation. He portrayed capitalism as the chief culprit that gave rise to this undesirable state of affairs.

Marx was adamant that man can never be truly happy or free in a capitalistic society. Man, he said, has become an alienated being and does not feel "at home" in a capitalistic environment. However, this alienation will not last forever. Marx believed that history is inexorably moving toward a climactic day when the oppressed workers of the world, the *proletariat*, will rise up and overthrow their capitalistic oppressors, the *bourgeoisie*. In the place of the old bourgeois society with its classes and class antagonisms, there will be a harmonious society in which there is equity for all.

THE THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION

Drawing from European theologians and Marxism, Latin American theologians developed their own theology by radically reinterpreting Scripture with "a bias toward the poor." Let us now briefly survey key aspects of the theology of liberation.

Liberation theology begins with the premise that all theology is biased — that is, particular theologians reflect the economic and social classes of those who developed them. Accordingly, the traditional theology predominant in North America and Europe is said to "perpetuate the interests of white, North American/European, capitalist males." This theology allegedly "supports and legitimates a political and economic system — democratic capitalism — which is responsible for exploiting and impoverishing the Third World."³

Like Bonhoeffer, liberation theologians say theology must start with a "view from below" — that is, with the sufferings of the oppressed. Within this broad framework, different liberation theologians have developed distinctive methodologies for "doing" theology.

Gustavo Gutierrez, author of *A Theology of Liberation*, provides us with a representative methodology. Like other liberationists, Gutierrez rejects the idea that theology is a systematic collection of timeless and culture-transcending truths that remains static for all generations. Rather, theology is in flux; it is a dynamic and ongoing exercise involving contemporary insights into knowledge, humanity, and history.

Gutierrez emphasizes that theology is not just to be *learned*, it is to be *done*. In his thinking, "praxis" is the starting point for theology. Praxis (from the Greek *prasso*: "to work") involves revolutionary action on behalf of the poor and oppressed — and out of this, theological perceptions will continually emerge. The theologian must therefore be immersed in the struggle for transforming society and proclaim his message *from that point*.

In the theological process, then, *praxis* must always be the first stage; *theology* is the second stage. Theologians are not to be mere *theoreticians*, but *practitioners* who participate in the ongoing struggle to liberate the oppressed.

Sin. Using methodologies such as Gutierrez's, liberationists interpret sin not primarily from an individual, private perspective, but from a social and economic perspective. Gutierrez explains that "sin is not considered as an

individual, private, or merely interior reality...Sin is regarded as a social, historical fact, the absence of brotherhood and love in relationships among men."⁴

Liberationists view capitalist nations as sinful specifically because they have oppressed and exploited poorer nations. Capitalist nations have become prosperous, they say, at the expense of impoverished nations. This is often spoken of in terms of "dependency theory" — that is, the development of rich countries *depends* on the underdevelopment of poor countries.

There is another side to sin in liberation theology. Those who are oppressed can and do sin by acquiescing to their bondage. To go along passively with oppression rather than resisting and attempting to overthrow it — by violent means if necessary — is sin.⁵

The use of violence has been one of the most controversial aspects of liberation theology. Such violence is *not* considered sinful if it is used for resisting oppression. Indeed, certain liberation theologians "will in some cases regard a particular action (e.g., killing) as sin if it is committed by an oppressor, but not if it is committed by the oppressed in the struggle to remove inequities. The removal of inequities is believed to result in the removal of the occasion of sin [i.e., the oppressor] as well."⁶

Salvation. Salvation is viewed not primarily in terms of life after death for the individual, but in terms of bringing about the kingdom of God: a new social order where there will be equality for all. This is not to deny eternal life *per se*, but it is to emphasize that the *eternal* and the *temporal* "intersect" in liberation theology. "If, as the traditional formulation has it, history and eternity are two parallel (i.e., nonintersecting) realms, our goal within history is to gain access to eternity."⁷ But if history and eternity intersect, "if salvation is moving into a new order...then we must strive against everything which at present denies that order."⁸

God. Liberationists argue that the traditional Christian doctrine of God manipulates the divine being such that He appears to favor the capitalistic social structure. They claim the orthodox view of God is rooted in the ancient Greeks who saw God as a static being — distant and remote from human history. This distorted view of a transcendent deity has, they say, yielded a theology that understands God as "out there," far removed from the affairs of humankind. As a result, many Latin Americans have adopted a passive stance in the face of their oppression and exploitation.

Liberation theologians have thus tried to communicate to their compatriots that God is *not* impassive. Rather, He is dynamically involved in behalf of the poor and downtrodden. And because God stands against oppression and exploitation, *those who follow Him must do likewise*. Indeed, Gutierrez says that "to know God is to do justice."⁹

Jesus Christ. While liberation theologians do not outright deny Christ's deity, there is no clear-cut, unambiguous confession that Jesus is God. The *significance* of Jesus Christ lies in His example of struggling for the poor and the outcast. The Incarnation is reinterpreted to represent God's total immersion into man's history of conflict and oppression. By His words and actions, Jesus showed us how to become true sons of God — that is, by bringing in the kingdom of God through actively pursuing the liberation of the oppressed.

Most liberationists see Jesus' death on the cross as having no vicarious value; rather, Jesus died because He upset the religious/political situation of His time. Leonardo Boff says Jesus' followers fabricated the idea that Jesus' death had a transcendent, salvific significance: "The historically true events are the crucifixion, the condemnation by Pilate, and the inscription on the cross in three languages known by the Jews. The rest of the events are theologized or are pure theology developed in light of the resurrection and of the reflection upon the Old Testament."¹⁰ Jesus' death is unique because "he historicizes in exemplary fashion the suffering experienced by God in all the crosses of the oppressed."¹¹ Liberationists acknowledge Jesus' resurrection, but they are not clear on its significance.

The Church. Liberation theology does not ask what the church *is*, but rather what it means "*to be* the church in a context of extreme poverty, social injustice and revolution....In the context of liberation theology the mission of the church seems to be more important than its nature."¹²

Gutierrez and other liberation theologians say the church's mission is no longer one of a "quantitative" notion of saving numbers of souls.¹³ Rather, the church's mission "is at all times to protest against injustice, to challenge what is inhuman...to side with the poor and the oppressed."¹⁴

Related to the doctrine of the church has been the formation and growth of "ecclesial base communities," since the 1970s. These are "small, grass-roots, lay groups of the poor or the ordinary people, meeting to pray, conduct Bible studies, and wrestle concretely with social and political obligations in their settings."¹⁵

These communities have been effective in showing workers and peasants how to organize for their own social welfare. Gutierrez says that "in most Latin American countries, the church's base communities are the only form of social action available to the poor."¹⁶ Indeed, they have become "the major vehicle for the spread of liberation themes beyond academic circles. By 1980 there were as many as 100,000 base communities meeting in Latin America."¹⁷

ROMAN CATHOLIC OPENNESS

Since the emergence of liberation theology and its rapid growth via ecclesial base communities, divisive rifts have taken place between Vatican leadership and Roman Catholic theologians in Latin America. Over the past few decades, however, the Vatican has become progressively open to the *concept* of liberation.

For example, Vatican Council II — held in Rome from 1962 to 1965 — decried the wide disparity between the rich and poor nations of the world. Church leaders therefore proclaimed a "preferential option for the poor." Three years later, the Medellin Conference of Latin American Bishops (1968) denounced the extreme inequality among social classes as well as the unjust use of power and exploitation.¹⁸

Pope John Paul II has for years devoted himself to establishing a balanced policy on political activism for Roman Catholic clergy. He has staunchly advocated social justice, but has also consistently warned the clergy about becoming too involved in secular affairs and about the dangers of Marxism.

The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith — the Vatican's watchdog for doctrinal orthodoxy — issued two important statements on liberation theology. The *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation"* (1984) warned that it is impossible to invoke Marxist principles and terminology without ultimately embracing Marxist methods and goals. Marxism should therefore be avoided altogether.

Two years later (1986), the *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* affirmed the legitimacy of the oppressed taking action "through morally licit means, in order to secure structures and institutions in which their rights will be truly respected."¹⁹ However, "while the church seeks the political, social and economic liberation of the downtrodden, its primary goal is the spiritual one of liberation from evil."²⁰ The statement accepted armed struggle "as a last resort to put an end to an obvious and prolonged tyranny which is gravely damaging the common good."²¹

This relative openness of the Roman Catholic church was largely responsible for liberation theology's rapid expansion. As we shall see shortly, however, the church's concerns over Marxism have proven justified in view of recent world events. Vatican leadership has breathed a collective sigh of relief that Marxist elements in liberation theology now seem to be waning.

SHIFTING SANDS: 1990

Since the emergence of liberation theology in the 1960s, some aspects of the movement have remained constant. In his recent book, *Liberation Theology at the Crossroads* (1990), Paul E. Sigmund observes that liberation theology still sees the world as more characterized "by conflict than compromise, inequality than equality, oppression rather than liberation....It also still retains its...belief in the special religious character of the poor both as the object of God's particular love and the source of religious insights."²² Despite these constants, however, liberation theology has also seen significant changes in recent years.

We begin with the observation that 1989 saw almost the whole of Eastern Europe rise up in revolt against Marxist ideology. The major reforms occurring in the Soviet Union and East Bloc nations represent an admission that Marxism has failed.

Michael Novak, who holds the George Frederick Jewett Chair at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C., raised a penetrating question in view of recent European events: "What will become of the liberation theologians of Latin America and elsewhere who have so long praised the ideals of Marxist-Leninism, but now must see how hollow they are?"²³

Novak argues that a close reading of the Latin American theologians suggests that they "have begun to worry that they earlier invested too much credence in the social science they picked up from the universities."²⁴ For this reason, he says, "liberation theologians in the last few years have become much less hopeful about social structures, and increasingly concerned with issues of spirituality. They seem to be turning less to politics, and more to faith."²⁵ Sigmund agrees, noting that now "the greater emphasis [is] on the spiritual sources and implications of the concept of liberation."²⁶ (We shall address this "new spirituality" shortly.)

The shift in perspectives on socialism is one of the most important developments in liberation theology. In the recent writings of many liberation theologians, we find the concession that "the once-favored approach of substituting socialism for dependency or capitalism simply doesn't work, as has been seen in Eastern Europe."²⁷ Without necessarily deserting socialism, liberationists have shown an increasing ambiguity about what socialism really means, as well as an increasing tolerance of competing systems and an acceptance of Western-style democracy as a legitimate weapon against oppression.²⁸ Arthur F. McGovern, a Jesuit, comments that "the new political context in many parts of Latin America has led liberation theologians to talk about building a 'participatory democracy' from within civil society. Socialism no longer remains an unqualified paradigm for liberation aspirations."²⁹

Another significant development in liberation theology is that its theologians are speaking much less of dependency theory — the idea that the development of rich countries *depends* on the underdevelopment of poor countries. To be sure, liberation theologians are still predominantly anticapitalist, but many have recognized that dependency theory has rightfully been criticized for some of its fundamental assertions.

The fallacy of dependency theory has been demonstrated by sociologist Peter Berger of Boston University. Berger has pointed out that "the development experience of Japan and the 'four little dragons' of East Asia — Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore — represent 'empirical falsification' of the socioeconomic assumptions of dependency theory and liberation theology." On the other hand, Berger stressed, "there is simply no evidence of successful development by socialist third world nations anywhere or at anytime."³⁰

Moreover, the liberationist's solution to the dependency problem — a socialist break with the capitalist world — has looked less attractive to liberation theologians because "the models of socialism either seemed to be bankrupt, or were resorting to market incentives and private enterprise, even inviting multinational investment."³¹

Besides shifts in thinking on socialism and dependency theory, many have had second thoughts about liberation theology because of the bloodshed it has provoked. A *Los Angeles Times* article focusing on liberation theology in El Salvador notes that "the deaths of some of those who have challenged the establishment have brought sober second thoughts about both the basis and the practice of liberation theology."³² The article also observes that "such a violent counterrevolution here and in other Latin American nations — along with the failure of Eastern European Marxism and the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua to bring social, political and economic justice — have led to calls for a new look at liberation theology."³³ Indeed, "some of the basic analytical assumptions and practical applications of liberation theology are being questioned, not just by the conservative elements of the [Catholic] church but also by some of those thinkers who first conceived the philosophy."³⁴

Sigmund has observed that in view of the bloodshed associated with the movement in recent years, liberation theologians are no longer offering the easy justifications of the necessity of "counterviolence" against the "institutionalized violence" of the political establishment.³⁵ He also notes that the most obvious change in liberation theology "is from an infatuation with socialist revolution to a recognition that the poor are not going to be liberated by cataclysmic political transformations, but by organizational and personal activities in Base Communities."³⁶

We have already noted that liberation theologians are focusing more on issues of spirituality. First and foremost, this means that liberation theologians are deriving more of their liberationist concepts from the Bible as opposed to social theory. Early books by liberation theologians focused primarily on social analysis and had very few biblical references. Now the situation is practically reversed: recent books by liberation theologians contain many biblical references and very little social analysis. There is much more "theology" in liberation theology these days. But their methodological approach is *still* one of a preferential treatment to the poor.

Besides greater rootedness in the Bible, there also seems to be more interest in spiritual disciplines — such as prayer, devotions, exercising faith, and fellowshiping with other believers. Much of this takes place at a grassroots level in ecclesial base communities. Bible studies on "liberation passages" (such as Mary's Magnificat, Luke 1:46-55) are common. The goal is to discover how Scripture applies to specific problems in the lives of the oppressed.

We have noted that liberation theology is predominantly a Roman Catholic movement. An important factor now impacting the movement in Latin America is the explosion of evangelical Protestantism there. "Latin America is no longer the Roman Catholic monolith it once was. Since the late 1960s, the number of Protestants...has surged from 15 million to an estimated 40 million, about 10 percent of the population of Latin America."³⁷ Brazilian bishop Monsignor Boaventura Kloppenburg says that "Latin America is turning Protestant even faster than Central Europe did in the sixteenth century."³⁸ The overwhelming majority of these Protestants are Pentecostal.

As to why so many are presently turning to evangelicalism, one analyst suggests that "there now is a widespread recognition that liberation theology overlooked the emotional, personal message most people seek from religion...At the simplest level, liberation theologians preached salvation through social change — meaning, in effect, socialism in one form or another. The evangelicals preach individual salvation through individual change."³⁹

David Martin, author of *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (1990), suggests that economic advancement is another underlying cause of the Protestant explosion. He argues that "evangelical religion and economic advancement...often go together...[they] support and reinforce one another."⁴⁰ Carmen Galilea, a sociologist in Santiago, said that the typical Pentecostal "is well-regarded. He is responsible. He doesn't drink and is better motivated and better paid. As a result, he rises economically."⁴¹ Pentecostal preaching "puts great emphasis on the demand to develop yourself," thus contributing to the economic rise.⁴²

In a recent article in *Insight* magazine, Daniel Wattenberg suggests that another factor linking Pentecostalism and upward mobility is "the mutual material support available within the Pentecostal faith community (the churches provide a network that often functions as a job or housing referral agency)."⁴³ Moreover, volunteer work in the church "utilizes peoples' talents and creates opportunities to develop new skills that may give them a sense of usefulness and fulfillment for the first time in their lives."⁴⁴ The skills learned in a church context also give an edge to church members in seeking work *outside* the church.

Big changes are occurring in Latin America, and it remains to be seen where it will all lead. The likelihood is that (1) Marxism will continue to wane; (2) liberation theologians will continue to focus more on issues of spirituality; (3) the Protestant explosion will continue, with an emphasis on *personal* transformation; and (4) all this will probably have some positive effect on social and economic conditions in the region.

THE BIBLE AND POVERTY

Critics of liberation theology at times come across as though they are detached and unsympathetic to Latin American poverty. No doubt some of these critics actually do lack concern. Before offering criticisms of this controversial theology, therefore, it is important that we first affirm that there is a strong scriptural basis for helping the poor.

In the Old Testament, God gave the theocracy of Israel specific guidelines for taking care of the poor. He commanded that the corners of fields were not to be reaped so that something would be left for the needy to eat (Lev. 19:9-10).

God also promised a special blessing to all who gave to the poor (Prov. 19:17), and judgment to those who oppressed the poor (Ps. 140:12). Robbing and cheating the poor were condemned (Hosea 12:7). Widows and orphans — who were especially vulnerable to oppression — came under special protection from the law (Exod. 22:22-23).

God in the law also made provisions for poor sojourners who were not a part of Israel's theocracy. Gleanings from the harvest were to be left for them (Deut. 24:19-21), and they were ranked in the same category as widows and orphans as being defenseless (Ps. 94:6).

Jesus is very clear about our responsibility to the poor and oppressed. Christ's strong warning that eternal condemnation awaits those who do not feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the prisoners (Matt. 25:31-46)

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shows that the disadvantaged are not merely a peripheral concern of His. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus taught that *anybody in need* is our neighbor (Luke 10:29f.).

The biblical view of the poor and oppressed is such that God's people everywhere *should* be appalled at the poverty of the people in Latin America. Liberation theologians and the people of Latin America have a legitimate gripe. Indeed, how can the church in Latin America *not* act to help relieve the suffering of its people?

Nevertheless, a legitimate and commendable concern for the poor and oppressed must never be used to justify a theological methodology that leads to a gross distortion of Christianity — the only *true* means of liberation. Evangelicals maintain that this is precisely what Latin American liberationists have done.

A FAULTY FOUNDATION

Inasmuch as the liberationist's views on God, Jesus Christ, the church, sin, and salvation are an outgrowth of his or her theological methodology, it follows that the starting point for a critique of liberation theology would be its hermeneutic. We shall therefore narrow our focus to this one issue.

Method is everything when interpreting Scripture. With an improper methodology, one is bound to distort the author's intended meaning — the only *true* meaning (see 2 Pet. 3:16).

The word *method* comes from the Greek *methodos*, which literally means "a way or path of transit." Methodology in Bible study is therefore concerned with the proper path to be taken in order to arrive at scriptural truth. Latin American theologians have chosen a "path" intended to produce liberation. But have they distorted the author's intended meaning in the process?

The Problem With Praxis

Foundationally, the liberation hermeneutic (which makes *praxis* the first step, and *theology* the second) is completely without any controlling exegetical criteria. Vernon C. Grounds is right when he says that "there is no exegetical magic by which new meanings can without limit be conjured out of the Bible under the illuminating creativity of new situations."⁴⁵

In liberation theology, the basic authority in interpretation ceases to be Scripture; it is rather the mind of the interpreter as he "reads" the current historical situation. It is one of the canons of literary (not just scriptural) hermeneutics, however, that what a passage means is fixed by the *author* and is not subject to alteration by readers. "Meaning is determined by the author; it is discovered by readers."⁴⁶

Only after the meaning has been discovered by the reader can it be applied to the current situation. Certainly we all agree that Christians must *practice* their faith in daily life. But from a Scriptural perspective, the way a Christian conducts his or her life is based on the objective, propositional revelation found in Scripture. Christians must know God's will as revealed in Scripture *before* they can act on it. Without a preeminence of Scripture over praxis, the Christian cannot know what to believe *or what to do*. Evangelicals therefore reject any suggestion that "we must *do* in order to *know*, and hope that *orthodoxy* will arise from *orthopraxis* [right action]."

An examination of Jesus' use of the Old Testament shows that He interpreted it as objective, propositional revelation (see Matt. 22:23-33). His hermeneutic knew nothing of making praxis the first step for discovering theological truth.

Truth that Transcends Culture and Time

Evangelicals have criticized the inability of liberation theology's hermeneutic to develop a culture-transcending theology with normative authority. Liberation theologians have shown little or no recognition of the fact that there are teachings and commands in Scripture that — owing to their divine inspiration (2 Tim. 3:16) — transcend all cultural barriers and are binding on all people everywhere. Key teachings of Scripture — such as man's sin, his alienation from God, his need for a personal Redeemer — speak universally to the human condition and can never be bound to particular cultures or situations.⁴⁷

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Moreover, evangelicals criticize the liberationist idea that theological truth is in a constant state of flux, changing along with the temporal conditions of society. Nunez has noted that "there are chapters of liberation theology that cannot be written at the present time, because they have to be the result of a given practice."⁴⁸ *Applications of Scripture* can change as the temporal conditions of society change — but the *Scripture-author's intended meaning* from which those applications are drawn are fixed and cannot be relativized.

Alien Preunderstandings

A "preunderstanding" of a *preferential option for the poor* is the very heart of liberation hermeneutics. Liberationists argue that "the reader of the Bible must deliberately choose his eyeglasses *before* he begins reading, and that the 'preferential option for the poor' means just that — a deliberate bias or perspective. Without this, the true meaning cannot be known. We must discard our North Atlantic lenses, we are told, and put on Third World ones — we must lay aside the eyeglasses of the rich to use those of the poor."⁴⁹

Relevant to this issue is a small book published in 1983 by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy. Entitled *Explaining Hermeneutics*, Article XIX declares: "We affirm that any preunderstandings which the interpreter brings to Scripture should be in harmony with scriptural teaching and subject to correction by it. We deny that Scripture should be required to fit alien preunderstandings, inconsistent with itself."⁵⁰ The point of this article is to avoid interpreting Scripture through an alien grid or filter (liberationism, for example) which obscures or negates its true message. This article acknowledges that "one's preunderstanding will affect his understanding of a text. Hence, to avoid misinterpreting Scripture one must be careful to examine his own presuppositions in the light of Scripture."⁵¹

Now, we must frankly admit that all interpreters are influenced to some degree by personal, theological, ecclesiastical, and political prejudices. Evangelical scholar Emilio Nunez has rightly conceded that none of us approaches Scripture in a "chemically pure" state. This is why Article XIX above is so important: preunderstandings must be *in harmony with* Scripture and *subject to correction by it*. Only those preunderstandings that are compatible with Scripture are legitimate.

Graham N. Stanton, Professor of New Testament Studies at the University of London King's College, elaborates on the corrective nature of Scripture: "The interpreter must allow his own presuppositions and his own pre-understanding to be modified or even completely reshaped by the text itself. Unless this is allowed to happen, the interpreter will be unable to avoid projecting his own ideas on to the text. Exegesis guided rigidly by pre-understanding will be able to establish only what the interpreter already knows. There must be a constant dialogue between the interpreter and the text."⁵² If this methodology is followed, "the text may well shatter the interpreter's existing pre-understanding and lead him to an unexpectedly new vantage point from which he continues his scrutiny of the text."⁵³

Had liberation theologians followed this one procedure, the *theology* of liberation would have turned out to be a horse of a different color. Indeed, a theologian who approached Scripture with a "preferential option for the poor" would have found — upon submitting this preunderstanding to the correction of Scripture — that his preunderstanding was unbiblical. For, from a scriptural perspective, both the poor *and* the rich, both the oppressed *and* oppressors, are afflicted by sin and are in need of salvation. Romans 3:23 says that "*all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Our Lord preached the gospel of salvation to the poor (Luke 7:22) but *He preached the same message to the rich* (Luke 5:32; 10:1-10). God is "not wanting *anyone* to perish, but *everyone* to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9).

Now, evangelicals concede that God has a special concern for the poor, and salvation is — by His own design — more readily *accepted* by the less fortunate (Matt. 19:23). Nevertheless, from Genesis to Revelation Scripture has a clear "preferential option" for *the fallen*.

By submitting his preunderstanding to Scripture, the liberationist would have also discovered that the gap between the rich and the poor is not the *cause* of man's predicament; it is merely one *symptom* of it (see Jer. 5:26-29). It was not primarily the *bourgeoisie* that needed to be overthrown; it was man's *sin* — his selfishness and greed — that needed conquering (1 Pet. 2:24). It was not fundamentally a political revolution that was needed, but a revolution in the human heart — something found only in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), who came not to be a model political revolutionary but to die on the cross for man's sins as the Lamb of God (Matt. 26:26-28).

We repeat, then, that if we are to understand the author's *intended* meaning in Scripture (the only *true* meaning), it is imperative that preunderstandings be *in harmony with* Scripture and *subject to correction by it*. Only then will it be possible to develop a truly biblical theology of liberation — a theology that at once emphasizes the fundamental need for liberation from sin, but at the same time stresses the biblical injunction to reach out in compassion to the poor.

A CHALLENGE TO EVANGELICALS

Are evangelicals as concerned as they should be about the plight of the poor and oppressed in our world? And if they are not, is this because there is a defect in their theology that ignores the biblical emphasis on caring for the poor and the needy? If liberationists have approached Scripture with a preunderstanding that "opts" for the poor, is it possible that some evangelicals have unwittingly approached Scripture with a preunderstanding that *filters out* sufficient concern for the poor and oppressed?

These are difficult questions, and it is incumbent upon every Christian to examine his or her heart on this issue. Certainly, evangelicals have little right to criticize the theology of liberation if they are not prepared to criticize possible deficiencies in their own theology in regard to caring for the poor and oppressed of our world.

Scripture is clear that we have a God-appointed responsibility to take whatever steps we can to help the poor. Yet, at the same time, we as evangelicals must insist that ultimately the transformation of any society *depends* on the prior transformation of the individuals that make up that society. This is the Christian counterpart to "dependency theory." The revolution so earnestly sought in society will best be accomplished as greater numbers of people in that society experience the revolution of new birth and the ongoing renewal of life in Christ.

NOTES

¹"An Attack on Liberation Theology," *Orange County Register*, 1 Dec. 1985, A10.

²Harvie M. Conn, "Liberation Theology," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 388.

³Dean C. Curry, *A World Without Tyranny* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 68.

⁴Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1971), 175.

⁵Justo L. Gonzalez and Catherine G. Gonzalez, *Liberation Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 23.

⁶Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 592.

⁷*Ibid.*, 895.

⁸Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 24.

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¹⁹Paul E. Sigmund, *Liberation Theology at the Crossroads* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 11.

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²²Sigmund, 181-82.

²³Michael Novak, "The Revolution That Wasn't," *Christianity Today*, 23 April 1990, 18.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 20.

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- ²⁶ Sigmund, 181.
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- ³⁰ Dean C. Curry, "Liberation Theology in 80s: Is There Something New?" *Eternity*, November 1985, 13.
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- ³² Freed, H8.
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- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*
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- ⁴⁹ W. Dayton Roberts, "Liberation Theologies," *Christianity Today*, 17 May 1985, 15.
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GLOSSARY

exegesis: Derived from a Greek word meaning "to draw out." Refers to the obtaining of a Scripture passage's meaning by *drawing the meaning out from the* text rather than reading it *into* the text (which is **eisegesis**).

hermeneutics: Refers to the science of interpretation. It is that branch of theology that prescribes rules and guidelines by which the Bible should be interpreted.

normative authority: Authority that is binding upon us in terms of what we are to believe and do.

praxis: From the Greek *prasso* (meaning "to work"), praxis involves revolutionary action on behalf of the poor and oppressed — and out of this, theological perceptions will (liberationists believe) continually emerge. In other words, praxis refers to the discovery and formation of theological "truth" out of a given historical situation through personal participation in the struggle for the liberation of the oppressed.

propositional revelation: The view that God in the Bible has communicated factual information (or propositions) about Himself; the view that God's special revelation in Scripture has been given in propositional statements.