

Lecture 9. Liberationist Christology: Gustavo Gutierrez

Within the past forty years, other voices have emerged in the Catholic theological tradition, and these voices too have addressed the issues of Christology. In this lecture we will focus broadly on the development of liberation theology and its Christological implications. We will then narrow the focus specifically to the work of Gustavo Gutierrez, a Dominican priest, is a Peruvian-born theologian who was the founder of Latin American liberation theology. He has consistently reflected upon the gospel and the saving work of Christ from the vantage point of the impoverished peoples of the world.

I. General Characteristics of Liberationist Theology: Liberation theology approaches the Christian tradition from the vantage point of the poorest people in the world. Vatican II voiced the need for the inculturation of the gospel: Renewed reflection on the relationship between the Church and the world. The Church as the sacrament of the salvation of the world. The Church must participate in the transformation of the world.

Many Latin American theologians return home after study in Europe and began to see the need for a new method of theologizing. 1968 - Meeting of Latin American bishops at Medellin, Colombia was a pivotal point in the development of liberation theology: Committed the Church to share the condition of the poor out of solidarity with them. Basic Christian communities. Use of the term "liberation"

Method of liberation theology: Analysis of the social situation. Exploration of the Christian tradition with a critical eye. Retrieval of dimensions of the Christian tradition that will contribute to the transformation of society (e.g., the Exodus and Easter traditions)

II. Gustavo Gutierrez: Background and Theological Orientation - Grew up in a poor Peruvian family. He experienced physical illness and debilitation as a teenager. Returns to Lima from Europe and teaches at Pontifical Catholic University, but is also involved in pastoral ministry in an impoverished section of the city. 1971 saw the publication of his influential work, *A Theology of Liberation*. Bartolome de las Casas, O.P. as a heroic figure.

Three levels of liberation: Social and political. Psychosocial (empowering people to assume conscious responsibility for their lives). Liberation from sin

III. Perspective on Christology: The incarnation is: "An incarnation into littleness and service in the midst of the overbearing power exercised by the

mighty of the world; an irruption that smells of the stable" - Gustavo Gutierrez, *The God of Life* (Orbis Books, 1991), 85. "It is from among the poor and despised that the message comes of the universal love that the God of Jesus Christ has for humankind" - Gustavo Gutierrez, *The God of Life*, 99.

The biblical portrait of God is one of life: "Holy Father, we are hungry. We suffer affliction, we lack work, we are sick...But despite all this, we believe in the God of life." - Gustavo Gutierrez, *The God of Life*, xi.

The ministry of Jesus - his identification with the least members of society: "Jesus is a king who identifies with the least members of society, those whom society scorns. That is why they make fun of his claim to kingship." - Gustavo Gutierrez, *The God of Life*, 87. Salvation as communion - the "messianic inversion"

Jesus' proclamation of the Reign of God - it is both gift and demand: Gift: it is the result of God's unmerited love for all human beings. Demand: responding to Jesus' message entails accepting the demands of the Reign of God, including the just treatment of the poor and the removal of systemic societal mechanisms that continue the injustices against the poor.

Universality and Preference: Universality: Jesus directs his preaching to everyone without exception. "Preference: Jesus shows preference for the plight of the least of the world.

IV. Death and Resurrection: "Jesus' death is the consequence of his struggle for justice, his proclamation of the kingdom, and his identification with the poor." - Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, 15.

With regards to the words of Caiaphas in John 11:1. "The powerful men among his people are alarmed by the success of Jesus' preaching; they see it challenging their interests, which they have grown accustomed (we know of similar cases today!) to identifying with the interests of the people as a whole." Gustavo Gutierrez, *The God of Life*, 25.

The cry from the cross: These words, "speak of the suffering and loneliness of one who feels abandoned by the hand of God" Gustavo Gutierrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. Matthew O'Connell (Orbis books, 1987), 97. Jesus' communion with suffering of human beings, "brought him down to the deepest level of history at the very moment when his life was ending." Gustavo Gutierrez, *On Job*, 100.

Whereas we saw that Rahner and Schillebeeckx viewed the resurrection of Jesus as confirmation or correction, Gutierrez sees it as the death of death, and therefore both confirmation and correction. Pope Francis - reaching out to those who live on the "existential peripheries" of the world.

Reflection Questions

1. What strikes you as particularly important and relevant about the liberationist perspective on faith and theology? Is there anything about this approach with which you disagree?
2. Gutierrez emphasizes that Jesus reveals the God of life. Which passages from the gospel speak to you about the God of life? What implications does this revelation have for Christian life and mission today?
3. Gutierrez describes Jesus' proclamation of the Reign of God as being characterized both by gift and demand, universality and preference. Do you agree with that description? If so, what relevance does it have for contemporary Christians?
4. What do you think of Gutierrez's description of Jesus' death as "communion in suffering and hope"? Is there anything about Jesus' death on the cross that can be a source of hope for people?