

The Long Chains of Liberation Theology

Introduction

“Two major evangelical organizations have formally endorsed principles that would add sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) to federal nondiscrimination law. The boards of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCC) and the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) quietly passed similar motions in recent months, advancing a multiyear effort they say is necessary to preserve religious freedom.”¹

Critics within the Evangelical ranks have called this move “The Great Evangelical Sellout.”² They are concerned that sincere efforts to preserve religious freedom may actually harm the Church. But those involved are insistent that they are intent only on preserving some semblance of religious freedom for Christians. CCCU board member Shirley Mullen defended the action, “As Christian higher educators, we are increasingly persuaded that the most viable political strategy is for comprehensive religious freedom protections to be combined with explicit support for basic human rights for members of the LGBT community.”³

Changes come rapidly, compromise is common-place, political strategies wax and wane. It is difficult for us to develop a clear picture of the direction our country may be headed. Religious freedom deserves to be a high priority for the leaders of Church. But compromise of sound doctrine is not an effective strategy, not only because it denies the strength of God’s Word, but also because it ignores forces that have long been at work to strip Christianity of religious freedom entirely. Those who compromise God’s Word in this way, not only risk their own faith, but also become pawns in the hands of those who would move Christianity outside the protections of religious freedom. I hope to present, in this brief essay how that may happen.

I. Liberation Theology- The Foundation

In 1973, a middle-aged Peruvian, Roman Catholic priest published a book that would set a new direction for much of Christianity, and lay the foundation for the shape of much of the Church today. Gustavo Gutierrez is considered the primary architect of what is now known as Liberation Theology. In his book, A Theology of Liberation he went far beyond the activism of the Social Gospel Movement of the late 19th century. Gutierrez was not so much concerned with getting Christians to act like Jesus by working to rid the world of social evils. His thesis was a radical reorientation of the nature of the Church, and the meaning of the Gospel.

He begins by reorienting the pursuit of theology. He writes that in the early centuries of the Church, theology was thought of as wisdom, which was characterized by spiritual life, and

¹ Derrick, J.C. “Board Backs SOGI Compromise” World Magazine December 12, 2018
https://world.wng.org/2018/12/boards_back_sogi_compromise

² Welch, David “LGBT-driven 'Fairness for All' Adopted by Evangelical Organization” The Christian Post Monday, January 07, 2019 <https://www.christianpost.com/voice/lgbt-driven-fairness-for-all-adopted-by-evangelical-organization-will-be-special-rights-for-a-few.html>

³ Derrick

separate from worldly concerns. From the twelfth century on, theology was thought of as a science, an intellectual discipline that focused on orthodoxy. At present, he argues that the proper form of theology is to be focused on the practice of living the faith within the specific context of the believer.⁴

This thought leads him to abandon the normal sources of authority, and ground the development of theology in the current circumstances of the world. "Instead of using only revelation and tradition as starting points, as classical theology has generally done, it must start with facts and questions derived from the world and from history."⁵ As a result, the Pastors of the Church are not considered theologians by virtue of their study of God's Word, but by their work toward liberating oppressed peoples. "The pastoral activity of the Church does not flow as a conclusion from theological premises. Theology does not produce pastoral activity; rather it reflects upon it. Theology must be able to find in pastoral activity the presence of the Spirit inspiring the action of the Christian community."⁶

While he claims not to be interested in denying the meaning of orthodoxy, he ends by castigating it as obsolete.

Rather, the goal is to balance and even to reject the primacy and almost exclusiveness which doctrine has enjoyed in Christian life and above all to modify the emphasis, often obsessive, upon the attainment of an orthodoxy which is often nothing more than fidelity to an obsolete tradition or a debatable interpretation. In a more positive vein, the intention is to recognize the work and importance of concrete behavior, of deeds, of action, of praxis in the Christian life.⁷

Reflection on the situation of the poor leads to a "liberating praxis", where the Church attempts to build the economic, spiritual and intellectual liberation of socially oppressed peoples as fulfillment of the kingdom of God.⁸ So, Gutierrez writes,

This is a theology which does not stop with reflecting on the world but rather tries to be a part of the process through which the world is transformed. It is a theology which is open—in the protest against trampled human dignity in the struggle against the plunder of the vast majority of people, in liberating love, and in the building of a new, just, and fraternal society—to the gift of the Kingdom of God.⁹

Further, he already sees a grand future for the work of the Church in this area. Those who live in poverty are beginning to recognize the forms of oppression visited upon them by the wealthy. The Church need only guide them in proper forms of liberation.

⁴ Gutierrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York. 1973. Pp 4-6.

⁵ Gutierrez, p. 12

⁶ Gutierrez, p. 11

⁷ Gutierrez, p. 10

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustavo_Guti%C3%A9rrez

⁹ Gutierrez. p. 15

A broad and deep aspiration for liberation inflames the history of mankind in our day, liberation from all that limits or keeps man from self-fulfillment, liberation from all impediments to the exercise of his freedom. Proof of this is the awareness of new and subtle forms of oppression in the heart of advanced industrial societies which offer themselves as models to the under-developed countries."¹⁰ (Emphasis added)

In this key passage he seeks to build on established Roman doctrine.

The encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*, [Pope Paul VI, March 26, 1967], goes a step further. In a somewhat isolated text it speaks clearly of 'building a world where every man, no matter what his race, religion or nationality, can live a fully human life, freed from servitude imposed on him by other men or by natural forces over which he has not sufficient control.'¹¹ (Emphasis added)

And finally, he comes round to justifying his thoughts in terms of a biblical expression.

'For freedom Christ has set us free.' (Gal. 5:1), St. Paul tells us. He refers here to liberation from sin insofar as it represents a selfish turning in upon oneself. To sin is to refuse to love one's neighbors and, therefore, the Lord himself. Sin—a breach of friendship with God and others—is according to the Bible the ultimate cause of poverty, injustice, and the oppression in which men live. In describing sin as the ultimate cause, we do not in any way negate the structural reasons and the objective determinants leading to these situations. It does, however, emphasize the fact that things do not happen by chance and that behind an unjust struct there is a personal or collective will responsible—a willingness to reject God and neighbor.¹²

Because Gutierrez is a contextual theologian he is determined to see material poverty as the dominant form of oppression at loose in the world. He develops his understanding of spiritual or Christian poverty, the counter element to material poverty, on the basis of his reading of Scripture, "...if material poverty is something to be rejected, as the Bible vigorously insists, then a witness of poverty cannot make it a spiritual ideal."¹³ In other words, he does not believe that Christians should live in or desire to live in material poverty. Rather,

Poverty is an act of love and liberation. It has redemptive value...Christian poverty has meaning only as a commitment of solidarity with the poor...It is not a question of idealizing poverty, but rather of taking it on as it is—an evil—to protest against it and to struggle to abolish it. As Ricoeur says, you cannot really be with the poor unless you are struggling against poverty...Christian poverty, an expression of love, is solidarity *with the poor* and is a protest *against poverty*.¹⁴ (Emphasis original)

¹⁰ Gutierrez, p. 27

¹¹ Gutierrez, p. 34

¹² Gutierrez, p. 35

¹³ Gutierrez, p. 299

¹⁴ Gutierrez, p. 300

Gutierrez, grounded in the Latin American experience of poverty, the context in which he lived every day, concludes that the true work of the Church and the proper pursuit of theology is manifest in the “liberating praxis,” which seeks to throw off the shackles of the practice of material poverty together with its structures and institutions. Of course, his dedication to the “practice” of theology, and his willingness to see poverty as the representation of all sin, eliminates the understanding of Christ’s vicarious work of establishing forgiveness as the true work of the Church. That is a matter for another paper. The thesis of this essay is that Gutierrez has also laid a foundation for an understanding of the orthodox Church as the ultimate oppressor.

II. Liberation Theology- Expanded

Clearly, Gutierrez was focused on material poverty as the mother of all oppressions. Still, he did establish a goal for the church to work toward the “...liberation from all impediments to the exercise of his freedom...” and he did express a desire that, “...every man, no matter what his race, religion or nationality, can live a fully human life, freed from servitude imposed on him by other men...” These ideals did not escape the attention of the Church, Roman and otherwise.

In the upheaval that characterized the end of the Vietnam war, everything seemed to be turned on its head. Institutions that had long been held in esteem by the general public (Government, Military, Industry, Church), were now suspect. At first the churches saw liberation theology as an accusation, as lumping them in with all the other oppressing institutions. However, over time, in their scramble to land on the right side of history, the Roman church and many main-line denominations saw liberation theology as a path toward much needed relevance.

In a conversation with the Jesuits of Central America, at the January 2019 World Youth Day in Panama, Pope Francis walked back his previous Marxist interpretation of liberation theology. His natural predisposition to the poor led him to say, “Today we old people laugh about how worried we were about liberation theology. What was missing then was communication to the outside about how things really were.”¹⁵ He means the leadership of the church was too isolated to know how much the poor were suffering.

While the official “endorsement” was a long time in coming, it is not difficult to see the unofficial impact of liberation theology on the church. Resistance to oppression, not just of the poverty kind, now sits on the throne as the *raison d’être* for a wide swath of the church. Recent developments in the Roman church are mind-boggling.

Condemned by the Vatican in 1984, liberation theology did not disappear. It mutated to subtler pretexts for its premises and presuppositions. The old language of class struggle has been recast into the more digestible—and clichéd—terms of sustainability. And in the name of the church’s historic concern for the poor comes a relatively modern

¹⁵ Pope Francis ‘Put your lives at stake’ February 14, 2019 <https://www.laciviltacattolica.com/put-your-lives-at-stake/>

disdain for modernity.... Under cover of deep ecology, liberation theology has come in out of the cold. And it is gunning to even the score between the industrial West and the Third World... What we are now seeing is the triumph of a 60-year-old plan, the successful execution of a well-thought out plan to bring a new sort of thinking into the heart of the Church, a thinking rooted in elements of Liberation Theology...¹⁶

The oppression of the earth may be the latest fad to enliven the church, but it joins a long line of contenders. The list of oppression *du jour* includes: race (which took on its own life in one form as “Black Liberation Theology”); gender (at first in the form of feminism, later as the “Me Too” movement, then for homosexual behavior, and today for the trans-gender phenomenon); religion (particularly in America in favor of Muslims); and ethnicity (with its current expression of care for the Latin American immigrant).

This list is, of course, not exhaustive. A church that has jettisoned the gospel is not above grasping at straws. No oppression is too small. Thus, some churches seem to be on the prowl for some vile oppression to oppose, be it of whales or seals, of abortive mothers or those who want to kill themselves, of Kurds, Albinos, Native Americans, or the domestically abused. Oppression is a reality in a sinful world. There are plenty of good causes, to be sure, and I am not suggesting that the Church has a stellar record regarding true oppression. But as a substitute for the Gospel of Jesus, the elimination of oppression is destructive to the Church.

Recently the ELCA publicly joined the fray of oppression opposers when it declared itself a sanctuary church. In the words of its own press release, “In a key action this afternoon, the 2019 ELCA Churchwide Assembly voted to approve a memorial that declares the ELCA a sanctuary church. The ELCA is the first North American denomination to declare itself a sanctuary church body. As a sanctuary church the ELCA is committed to serving and supporting migrant children and families in communities across the country.”¹⁷ Paul Egensteiner, the Bishop of the Metropolitan New York Synod summarized the action, “I am thrilled to be part of the sanctuary initiative. The ELCA has long been one of the most welcoming denominations, and we look forward to broadening this initiative on a national scale, much like we have done with our efforts in the LGBTQIA+ community, and our efforts surrounding racism awareness, domestic violence training, and inclusion and protection of women and children.”¹⁸

Numerous Christian confessions have succumbed to the Liberation Theology virus, busying themselves with eliminating various cultural oppressors. Those who hew to the traditional understanding of oppression, that of sin, death and the devil are left holding the bag of cultural oppressions as if it belonged to them. Herein lies the problem. Those who are unwilling to endorse combatting the more culturally unacceptable forms of oppression as their marching orders, immediately become suspect. If they attempt to argue against efforts to eliminate certain oppressions, on religious grounds, for example SOGI laws, or rights for those

¹⁶ Maureen Mullarkey, “Vatican’s Amazon Synod Uses Third World As Totems Of Marxist Revival” The Federalist, August 29, 2019 <https://thefederalist.com/2019/08/29/vaticans-amazon-synod-uses-third-world-totems-marxist-revival/>

¹⁷ <https://elca.org/News-and-Events/8000>

¹⁸ <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/evangelical-lutheran-church-declares-itself-sanctuary-denomination-142100840.html>

desiring to abort their children, they are labeled haters, and worse, oppressors. When that happens, rights to religious freedom are sure to fall.

III. Liberation Theology- Applied to Bind

Liberation theology, recognized or not, has a long reach. Its chains stretch out to bind the Christian Church in the United States of America today. In some cases, the Church, in attempt to be “fair,” may actually bind itself. A case in point is the recent adoption of “Critical Race Theory” as an analytic tool, by the Southern Baptist Convention.¹⁹ While the resolution declares these analytic tools must be held in submission to the Scriptures, it nonetheless, opens the door to the concept of liberation within the Church.

In a strange twist, that anyone who has attended a church-wide convention will be familiar with, the resolution that was adopted contradicted the original overture submitted for consideration. The original overture, amended by a floor committee, opposed the use of the theory because it depended heavily on the categories of the “oppressor” and “oppressed” to analyze social systems.

Critical race theory and intersectionality are founded upon unbiblical presuppositions descended from Marxist theories and categories, and therefore are inherently opposed to the Scriptures as the true center of Christian union...both critical race theory and intersectionality as ideologies have infiltrated some Southern Baptist churches and institutions—institutions funded by the Cooperative Program...critical race theory upholds postmodern relativistic understandings of truth and...divides humanity into groups of oppressors and oppressed, and is used to encourage biblical, transcendental truth claims to be considered suspect when communicated from groups labeled as oppressors.²⁰ (Emphasis Added)

Critical Race Theory is a sub-category of “Critical Theory” whose connection to Liberation Theology remains unclear. Both function with the same language and goals. It may be that Gutierrez was seeking to adapt Critical Theory to use in the Church. Critical Theory seems to have pre-dated Liberation Theology.

Critical Theory in the narrow sense designates several generations of German philosophers and social theorists in the Western European Marxist tradition known as the Frankfurt School. According to these theorists, a “critical” theory may be distinguished from a “traditional” theory according to a specific practical purpose: a theory is critical to the extent that it seeks human “emancipation from slavery”, acts as

¹⁹ “On Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality” <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/2308/resolution-9--on-critical-race-theory-and-intersectionality>

²⁰ Garnett, Matthew “In Last-Minute Move, Southern Baptist Convention Supports Anti-Christian Racial Identity Politics” The Federalist June 18, 2019 <https://thefederalist.com/2019/06/18/last-minute-move-southern-baptist-convention-supports-anti-christian-racial-identity-politics/>

a “liberating ... influence”, and works “to create a world which satisfies the needs and powers” of human beings (Horkheimer 1972, 246).²¹ (Emphasis added)

The systems of Critical Theory, and Critical Race Theory categorize the Church as an oppressive force under the influence of white, (male) privilege. All the caveats of the Southern Baptist Convention resolution notwithstanding, the use of these theories bind not only the activities of the Church, but, as the author of the original overture said, brings the truth claims of the Bible under suspicion.

In other cases, the shackles are clapped on the wrists of the Church by outside forces. To many, the loss of religious freedom for the Christian Church, or at least certain segments thereof, is unthinkable. The skirmishes involving individuals whether bakers, florists, or photographers who have desired to live their faith in the public arena, while bothersome, have not found a principle to remove the long-cherished freedom wholesale. Perhaps it will never be found. Or perhaps the other shoe has yet to drop.

That shoe may show up by means of a rewrite of the history of the Church. The wanton rewriting of history is not without precedent. In fact, the New York Times has launched a recent effort to do just that.

The 1619 Project is a major initiative from The New York Times observing the 400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery. It aims to reframe the country’s history, understanding 1619 as our true founding, and placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are.²²

Reframing American history, to achieve an “oppressors versus the oppressed” hue to not only the beginning of the nation but to every subsequent action is actually a much more daunting task than presenting certain portions of the Church in that light. Textbooks are already in place to teach American history this way. “The central message of Howard Zinn’s popular textbook ‘A People’s History of the United States’ is the Marxist narrative of ‘oppressed’ versus ‘oppressor.’”²³ Can textbooks castigating Christianity as an oppressive force be far behind?

There are voices that have begun to adopt this narrative. “When Europeans ‘founded’ America, they took any land that wasn’t ‘Christian’ and claimed it ‘for God’ — which meant that they were given full reign by the church to decide who looked saved and who didn’t. The Doctrine of Discovery gave them full permission to oppress...”²⁴ There is little doubt that the

²¹ “Critical Theory” <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/critical-theory/>

²² <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html>

²³ Lawson, Joshua “No, America Wasn’t Built on Slavery” The Federalist August 21, 2019. https://thefederalist.com/2019/08/21/no-america-wasnt-built-slavery-faith-men-created-equal/?utm_source=The+Federalist+List&utm_campaign=42ab069118-RSS+The+Federalist+Daily+Updates+w+Transom&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_cfc868ceb-42ab069118-83987381&fbclid=IwAR2wF4BcNcvGw33uOO1WOm_EUGIfy0TlSV_0ZbIS4DI_QGWLAPS9TRafDEc

²⁴ Curtice, Kaitlin “When the Church Uses God’s Name to Oppress” Sojourners, March 5, 2018 <https://sojo.net/articles/when-church-uses-god-s-name-oppress>

Church made errors with regard to its treatment of Native Americans. But to say that it operated with “full permission to oppress,” paints an entirely different picture of reality. Likewise, with regard to slavery, the Church is being called the oppressor.

The introduction of “Christianity” into what we now call ‘North America’ was genocidal by nature. The religion was offered to indigenous tribes and African slaves as the only alternative to being killed, and they were often enslaved and killed anyways. People were bought and sold and raped and abused. Land was stolen. Countless lives were ruthlessly destroyed by people who claimed to follow the ‘Prince of Peace.’ This was how Westernized Christendom was built: violently and as a weapon to help establish white-dominated social structures of colonial rule.²⁵

This, of course, was not how Westernized Christendom was built, but the narrative exists, and is appealing to those who would limit or remove some of the freedoms the Church has enjoyed in this country. In this scenario, the various incidents of Christians in America who have been taken to court over their desire to speak their faith in the public arena begin to look less isolated, and more like attempts to find a method to muzzle Christians.

Indeed, that was the conclusion of the New Mexico Supreme court in the case of a Christian photographer, Elaine Huguenin, who declined to photograph a homosexual wedding. “The New Mexico Supreme Court ruled on August 22, 2013 against Jonathan and Elaine. One of the justices said that the Huguenins are ‘now are compelled by law to compromise the very religious beliefs that inspire their lives,’ and he declared that this compulsion ‘is the price of citizenship.’”²⁶ The United States Supreme Court declined to hear the appeal of this case.

If and when, a certain segment of the Christian Church is declared an oppressive institution, the elimination of its freedom, at least with regard to those areas of oppression, (most likely abortion, euthanasia, and gender issues), is a foregone conclusion.

There is precedent in other countries. A story out of Chile is ominous. A teacher of Catholic doctrine at a Chilean school, Ms Pavez, entered into a public homosexual relationship and refused to repent. The Roman Church moved to revoke her certification to teach religion due to her violation of Church doctrine and the public scandal it caused. She appealed to the Inter-American Human Rights Commission based in Washington, D.C., and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights based in San José, Costa Rica.

The Commission issued three major recommendations to Chile. First, that it should reinstate Ms. Pavez to her former post as a religion teacher, regardless of her lack of aptness in the eyes of the Church. Second, that it should reform the existing legislation that had allowed the Church to revoke her certificate, so that it would no longer be applied in a “discriminatory” manner. And third, that the State had to “train” those persons in charge of assessing the aptness of the teachers—in this case, the bishops of the Catholic Church—in the scope and content of the principle of equality and non-discrimination, especially its protection of sexual orientation. Put another way, the

²⁵ Mattson, Stephen, “The White Church has been a Steady Oppressor. Sojourners. October 17, 2018.

²⁶ Alliance Defending Freedom, <https://www.adflegal.org/detailspages/case-details/elane-photography-v-willock>

Commission is calling on the state to “re-educate” the bishops on sexuality and discrimination, in order to make them fall in line with its agenda.²⁷

It appears that the “oppressor vs the oppressed” narrative is gaining traction as a method of limiting Christian speech and activity.

IV. Caution- Liberation May Not be for All

The church falls ready prey to using the weapons of the world, to its peril. It is very tempting to turn the tables in an attempt to portray the Christian Church as the most oppressed of all. Indeed, statistics bear this out. Acts of violence perpetrated against Christians, even in recent years, are numerous. However, a whiny attitude of “pity us,” is bound to backfire. The church, particularly in the west, has been too wealthy, and too powerful, for too long. Those using liberation as the reason for their existence will not countenance this tactic. Their desire to be liberators will destroy all attempts by another portion of the church to allege oppression.

Conclusion

Liberation Theology has affected the way that many people, both Christian and non-Christian think about the work of the Church. For all its vaunted promise, its legacy is to bind the freedom of the faithful Christian Church. Those who have adopted the elimination of oppression as their gospel may think they have found both a good cause and a means of survival. Their politically-correct position also plays into the hands of those who do not want to hear the pure Gospel. If the Liberation-favoring church gains the political favor necessary to be thought of as the “true Christian church,” then the rest of the Church can be thought of as an oppressive sect. If that becomes true, then many means will be found to oppress the oppressing Church and limit her freedom.

As expressed in the introduction to this essay, many within the Church have occupied themselves with fighting for religious freedom. Within the American experience this is a good and viable expression of citizenship. However, two cautions may be in order. First, it is a mistake to compromise the true doctrine as a political pawn in the pursuit of freedom. This tactic will not end well. Once severed from the lifeblood of the pure Word that church will not endure. Furthermore, such a compromise allows the rest of the Church to be labeled in ways that may jeopardize its freedom.

Second, the Church should prepare to lose this fight. Should the state move to limit how the Church can speak about gender, abortion or euthanasia issues, it would be well for the Church to steel itself to a proper response. Our words, our actions, cannot produce freedom. True freedom is a Divine prerogative. Only He who is perfectly free, and who came into this

²⁷ Henriquez, Tomas. “A Storm in Brewing in the Americas” Public Discourse- The Journal of the Witherspoon Institute. August 12, 2019 <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2019/08/55749/>

world to grant freedom, can truly set you free. And when He sets you free, despite whatever chains the state may place on you, you are free indeed.

There may come a time when we are called to hate religious freedom, lest its pursuit harm our faith. But now is a good time to count the cost. (Luke 14:27-28) Do not despair, for the Father granted you the kingdom. So, the Church stays the course, holds fast the confession, speaks the truth of God's Word, not in pursuit of freedom of religion, but from within the freedom its victor granted a long time ago.

S.D.G.

Terry Forke

Montana/Wyoming Winkel Conference

9/10/19

Quad-Circuit Conference

1/30/20