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## An Evangelical Theology of Liberation

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### SUMMARY

The central biblical doctrine is that God *is* on the side of the poor and the oppressed. Tragically, evangelical theology has largely ignored this doctrine, and thus our theology has been unbiblical — indeed, even heretical — on this important point.

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The emergence of theologies of liberation -- whether black, feminist or Latin

American -- is probably the most significant theological development of recent years. At the heart of liberation theology is the attempt fundamentally to rethink theology from the standpoint of the poor and oppressed. The central theological foundation of this approach is the thesis that God is on their side. It is that basic thesis that I want to probe. Space here is too limited to develop a comprehensive evangelical theology of liberation, so instead I want to answer two questions. How biblical is the view that God is on the side of the poor and the oppressed? Second, in light of the answer to this first question, how biblical is evangelical theology?

### ***Some Preliminary Clarifications***

I want to argue that one of the central biblical doctrines is that God *is* on the side of the poor and the oppressed. Tragically, evangelical theology has largely ignored this doctrine, and thus our theology has been unbiblical -- indeed, even heretical -- on this important point. Before I develop this double thesis, however, I want to outline some things I do *not* mean when I say that God is on the side of the poor and oppressed.

I do not mean that material poverty is a biblical ideal. This glorious creation is a wonderful gift from our Creator. He wants us to revel in its glory and splendor.

Second, I do not mean that the poor and oppressed are, because they are poor and oppressed, to be idealized or automatically included in the church. The poor sinfully disobey God in the same ways that we wretched middle-class sinners do, and they therefore need to enter into a living personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Only then do they become a part of the church. One of the serious weaknesses in much of liberation theology is an inadequate ecclesiology, especially the tendency to blur the distinction between the church and the world. And one can understand that tendency. It is understandable that black and Latin American theologians would be impressed by the fact that whereas most of the organized church regularly ignores the injustice that causes poverty and oppression, those who do care enough to risk their lives for improved conditions are often people who explicitly reject Christianity. Hence one can understand why someone like Hugo Assmann would conclude that the true church is

the conscious emergence and the more explicit enacting of the one meaning of the one history, in other words, a revolutionary consciousness and commitment. The explicit reference to Jesus Christ becomes in this view gratuitous in the original sense of the word -- something which is not demanded by or needed for the struggle [of socioeconomic liberation] . . . The reference to Jesus Christ does not add an 'extra' to the historical struggle but is totally and without rest identified with it.

In spite of deep appreciation for the factors that lead to an identification of the church with the poor and oppressed or with the revolutionary minority that seeks liberation for them, one must insist that such a view is fundamentally unbiblical.

Third, when I say that God is on the side of the poor and oppressed, I do not mean that God cares more about the salvation of the poor than the salvation of the rich or that the poor have a special claim to the gospel. It is sheer nonsense to say with Enzo Gatti: "The human areas that are poorest in every way are the most qualified for receiving the Saving Word. They are the ones that have the best right to that Word; they are the privileged recipients of the Gospel." God cares equally about the salvation of the rich and the poor. To be sure, at the psychological level Gatti is partly correct. Church-growth theorists have discovered what Jesus alluded to long ago in his comment on the camel going through the eye of the needle. It is extremely difficult for rich persons to enter the Kingdom. The poor are generally more ready than the rich to accept the gospel. But that does not mean that God desires the salvation of the poor more than the salvation of the rich.

Fourth, to say that God is on the side of the poor is not to say that knowing God is nothing more than seeking justice for the poor and oppressed. Some -- although certainly not most -- liberation theologians do jump to this radical conclusion. Jose Miranda says bluntly, "To know Jahweh is to achieve justice for the poor. . . . The God who does not allow himself to be objectified, because only in the immediate command of conscience is he God, clearly specifies that he is knowable *exclusively* in the cry of the poor and the weak who seek justice." It is precisely Miranda's kind of one-sided, reductionist approach that offers comfortable North Americans a plausible excuse for ignoring the radical biblical Word that seeking

justice for the poor is inseparable from -- even though it is not identical with -- knowing Jahweh.

Finally, when I say that God is on the side of the poor, I do not mean that hermeneutically we must start with some ideologically interpreted context of oppression (for instance, a Marxist definition of the poor and their oppressed situation) and then reinterpret Scripture from that ideological perspective. Black theologian James H. Cone's developing thought is interesting at this point. In 1969, in *Black Theology and Black Power*, he wrote: "The fact that I am Black is my ultimate reality. My identity with *blackness*, and what it means for millions living in a white world, controls the investigation. It is impossible for me to surrender this basic reality for a higher, more universal reality."

By the time Cone wrote *God of the Oppressed* (1978), however, he realized that such a view would relativize all theological claims, including his own critique of white racist theology.

How do we distinguish our words about God from God's Word ...?  
Unless this question is answered satisfactorily, black theologians' distinction between white theology and Black Theology is vulnerable to the white contention that the latter is merely the ideological justification of radical black politics.

To be sure, Cone believes as strongly as other liberation theologians that the hermeneutical key to Scripture is God's saving action to liberate the oppressed. But how does he know that?

In God's revelation in Scripture we come to the recognition that the divine liberation of the oppressed is determined not by our perceptions but by the God of the Exodus, the prophets and Jesus Christ, who calls the oppressed into a liberated existence. Divine revelation *alone* is the test of the validity of this starting point. And if it can be shown that God as witnessed in the Scriptures is not the liberator of the oppressed, then black theology would have either to drop the "Christian" designation or to choose another starting point.

One can only wish that all liberation theologians agreed with Cone.

## **God's Intervention**

In what sense then *is* God on the side of the poor and oppressed? Let us first look briefly at three central points of revelation history -- the Exodus, the destruction of Israel and Judah, and the incarnation. At the central moments when God displayed his mighty acts in history to reveal his nature and will, he also intervened to liberate the poor and oppressed.

God displayed his power at the Exodus in order to free slaves. When God called Moses at the burning bush, he informed him that his intention was to end suffering and injustice: "I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians" (Exod. 3:7-8). Each year at the harvest festival, the Israelites repeated a liturgical confession celebrating the way God had acted to free a poor, oppressed people.

A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there. . . . And the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand [Deut. 26:5 ff., RSV].

Unfortunately, some liberation theologians see in the Exodus only God's liberation of an oppressed people and miss the fact that he also acted to fulfill his promises to Abraham, to reveal his will and to call out a special people. Certainly God acted to call a special people so that through them he could reveal his will and bring salvation to all. But his will included the fact that his people should follow him and side with the poor and oppressed. The fact that Yahweh did not liberate all poor Egyptians at the Exodus does not mean that he was not concerned for the poor everywhere -- any more than the fact that he did not give the Ten Commandments the Near East means that he did not intend the laws to have universal significance. Because God chose to reveal himself in history, he disclosed to certain people at particular points in time what he willed for all people everywhere.

At the Exodus, God acted to demonstrate that he is opposed to oppression. We distort the biblical interpretation of that momentous event unless we see that at this pivotal point, the Lord of the universe was at work correcting oppression and liberating the poor.

The prophets' explanation for the destruction of Israel and then Judah underlines the same point. The explosive message of the prophets is that God destroyed Israel not only because of idolatry (although certainly because of that too), but also because of economic exploitation and mistreatment of the poor.

The middle of the eighth century BC. was a time of political success and economic prosperity unknown since the days of Solomon. But it was precisely then that God sent his prophet Amos to announce the unwelcome news that the northern kingdom would be destroyed. Why? Penetrating beneath the façade of prosperity and economic growth, Amos saw terrible oppression of the poor. He saw the rich "trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth"(2:7). He saw that the affluent life style of the rich was built on oppression of the poor (6: 1-7). Even in the courts the poor had no hope because the rich bribed the judges (5:10-15).

God's word through Amos was that the northern kingdom would be destroyed and the people taken into exile (7:11, 17). A very few years after Amos spoke, it happened just as God had said. Because of its mistreatment of the poor, God destroyed the northern kingdom.

When God acted to reveal himself most completely in the incarnation, he continued to demonstrate his special concern for the poor and oppressed. St. Luke used the programmatic account of Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth to define Jesus' mission. The words which Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah are familiar to us all:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord [Luke 4:18-19, RSV].

After reading these words, Jesus informed his hearers that this Scripture was now fulfilled in himself. The mission of the Incarnate One was to preach the good news to the poor and to free the oppressed.

Many people spiritualize these words either by simplistically assuming that Jesus was talking about healing blinded hearts in captivity to sin or by appealing to the later Old Testament and intertestamental idea of "the poor of Jahweh" (the *anawim*). It is true that the latter Psalms and the intertestamental literature use the terms for the poor (especially *anawim*) to refer to humble, devout Israelites who place all their trust in Jahweh. But that does not mean that Jesus' usage had no connection with socioeconomic poverty. Indeed, it was precisely the fact that the economically poor and oppressed were the faithful remnant who trusted in Jahweh that led to the new usage according to which the words for the poor designated the pious faithful.

### **Sources of Wealth**

The second aspect of the biblical teaching that God is on the side of the poor and oppressed is that he works in history to cast down the rich and exalt the poor.

Mary's Magnificat puts it simply and bluntly:

My soul magnifies the Lord. . . .

He has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree;

he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away

[Luke 1:46-53, RSV].

Why does Scripture declare that God regularly reverses the good fortunes of the rich? Is God engaged in class warfare? Actually, our texts never say that God loves the poor more than the rich. But they do constantly assert that God lifts up the poor and disadvantaged. And they persistently insist that God casts down

the wealthy and powerful. Why? Precisely because, according to Scripture, the rich often become wealthy by oppressing the poor and failing to feed the hungry.

For example, through his prophet Isaiah, God declared that the rulers of Judah were rich because they had cheated the poor. Surfeited with affluence, the wealthy women had indulged in self-centered wantonness, oblivious of the suffering of the oppressed. The result, God said, would be devastating destruction (Isa. 3:14ff).

Sometimes Scripture does not charge the rich with direct oppression of the poor; it simply accuses them of failure to share with the needy. But the result is the same. The biblical explanation of Sodom's destruction provides one illustration of this terrible truth. If asked why Sodom was destroyed, virtually all Christians would point to the city's gross sexual perversity. But that is a one-sided recollection of what Scripture actually teaches. Ezekiel shows that one important reason God destroyed Sodom was because the city stubbornly refused to share with the poor.

Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, surfeit of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it [Ezek. 16:49-50, RSV].

The text does not say that the people of Sodom oppressed the poor (although they probably did). It simply accuses them of failing to assist the needy.

### **Denouncing Pious Shams**

The third aspect of the biblical teaching that God is on the side of the poor and oppressed is that the people of God, if they are really the people of God, are *also* on the side of the poor and oppressed. Those who neglect the needy are not really God's people at all -- no matter how frequent their religious rituals or how orthodox their creeds and confessions. The prophets sometimes made this point by insisting that knowing God and seeking justice for the oppressed are inseparable. At other times they condemned the religious rituals of the oppressors, who tried to worship God while continuing to oppress the poor.



Jeremiah announced God's harsh message that King Jehoiakim did not know Jahweh and would be destroyed because of his injustice:

Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice;

who makes his neighbor serve him for nothing, and does not give him his wages; ...

Did not your father eat and drink

and do justice and righteousness?

Then it was well with him.

He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well.

Is not this to know me?

says the Lord

[Jer. 22:13-16, RSV].

Knowing God necessarily involves seeking justice for the poor (cf. also Hos. 2:19-20).

The same correlation between seeking justice for the poor and knowledge of God is equally clear in the messianic passage of Isaiah 11:1-9. Of the shoot of the stump of Jesse, the prophet says: "With righteousness he shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth" (v. 4 RSV). In this ultimate messianic shalom, "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (v. 9, RSV).

Nor has God changed. Jesus repeated the same theme. He warned the people about scribes who secretly oppress widows while making a public display of their

piety. Their pious-looking garments and frequent visits to the synagogue are a sham. Woe to religious hypocrites "who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers" (Mark 12:38-40).

The prophetic word against religious hypocrites raises an extremely difficult question. Are the people of God truly God's people if they oppress the poor? Is the church really the church if it does not work to free the oppressed?

As George Ladd has said, "Jesus redefines the meaning of love for neighbor; it means love for any man in need." In light of the parable of the Good Samaritan and the clear teaching of Matthew 5:43 ff., one is compelled to say that those who fail to aid the poor and oppressed (whether they are believers or not) are simply not the people of God.

Lest we forget the warning, God repeats it in I John. "But if any one has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and truth" (3:17-18. [RSV]; cf. also James 2:14-17). Again, the words are plain. What do they mean for Western Christians who demand increasing affluence each year while people in the Third World suffer malnutrition, deformed bodies and brains, even starvation? The text clearly says that if we fail to aid the needy, we do not have God's love -- no matter what we may say. The text demands deeds, not pious phrases and saintly speeches. Regardless of what we do or say at 11:00 A.M. Sunday morning, those who neglect the poor and oppressed are not the people of God.

But still the question persists. Do professing believers cease to be Christians because of continuing sin? Obviously not. The Christian knows that sinful selfishness continues to plague even the most saintly. We are members of the people of God not because of our own righteousness but solely because of Christ's death for us.

That response is extremely important and true. But it is also inadequate. All the texts from both testaments which we have just surveyed surely mean more than that the people of God are disobedient (but still justified all the same) when they neglect the poor. These verses pointedly assert that some people so disobey

God that they are not his people at all despite their pious profession. Neglect of the poor is one of the oft-repeated biblical signs of such disobedience.

In light of this clear biblical teaching, how biblical is evangelical theology? Certainly there have been some great moments of faithfulness. Wesley, Wilberforce and Charles Finney's evangelical abolitionists stood solidly in the biblical tradition in their search for justice for the poor and oppressed of their time. But 20th century evangelicals have not, by and large, followed their example. The evangelical community is largely on the side of the rich oppressors rather than that of the oppressed poor. Imagine what would happen if all the evangelical institutions -- youth organizations, publications, colleges and seminaries, congregations and denominational headquarters -- would dare to undertake a comprehensive two-year examination of their total program and activity to answer this question: Is there the same balance and emphasis on justice for the poor and oppressed in our programs as there is in Scripture? If those of us who are evangelicals did that with an unconditional readiness to change whatever did not correspond with the scriptural revelation of God's special concern for the poor and oppressed, we would unleash a new movement of biblical social concern that would change the course of modern history.

### ***An Unbiblical and Heretical Theology***

But our problem is not primarily one of ethics. It is not that we have failed to live what our teachers have taught. Our theology itself has been unbiblical and therefore heretical. I think James Cone is right when he says: "Theologians of the Christian Church have not interpreted Christian ethics as an act for the liberation of the oppressed because their views of divine revelation were defined by philosophy and other cultural values rather than by the biblical theme of God as the liberator of the oppressed." By largely ignoring the central biblical teaching that God is on the side of the poor, evangelical theology has been profoundly unorthodox. The Bible has just as much to say about this doctrine as it does about Jesus' resurrection. And yet we evangelicals insist on the resurrection as a criterion of orthodoxy and largely ignore the equally prominent biblical teaching that God is on the side of the poor and the oppressed.

Now please do not misunderstand me at this point. I am not saying that the

resurrection is unimportant. The bodily resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is absolutely central to Christian faith, and anyone who denies it or says it is unimportant has fallen into heresy. But if centrality in Scripture is any criterion of doctrinal importance, then the biblical teaching I have been analyzing ought to be an extremely important doctrine for evangelicals.

I am afraid evangelicals have fallen into theological liberalism. Of course, we usually think of theological liberalism in terms of classical 19th century liberals who denied the deity, the atonement and the bodily resurrection of Jesus our Lord. And that is correct. People who abandon those central biblical doctrines have fallen into terrible heresy. But notice what the essence of theological liberalism is; it is allowing our thinking and living to be shaped by the surrounding society's views and values rather than by biblical revelation. Liberal theologians thought that belief in the deity of Jesus Christ and his bodily resurrection was incompatible with a modern scientific world view. So they followed the surrounding scientifically oriented society rather than Scripture.

Evangelicals rightly called attention to this heresy -- and then tragically made exactly the same move in another area. We have allowed the values of our affluent, materialistic society to shape our thinking and acting toward the poor. It is much easier in evangelical circles today to insist on an orthodox Christology than on the biblical teaching that God is on the side of the poor. We have allowed our theology to be shaped by the economic preferences of our materialistic contemporaries rather than by Scripture. And that is to fall into theological liberalism. We have not been nearly as orthodox as we have claimed.

Past failure, however, is no reason for despair. I think we mean it when we sing, "I'd rather have Jesus than houses or lands." I think we mean it when we write and affirm doctrinal statements that boldly declare that we will not only believe but also live whatever Scripture teaches. But if we do mean it, then we must teach and live, in a world full of injustice and starvation, the important biblical doctrine that God and his faithful people are on the side of the poor and oppressed. Unless we drastically reshape both our theology and our entire institutional church life so that this fact becomes as central to evangelical theology and evangelical institutional programs as it is in Scripture, we will demonstrate to the world that our verbal commitment to *sola scriptura* is a dishonest ideological support for an

unjust, materialistic status quo. But I believe that in the coming years millions of us evangelicals will allow the biblical teaching that God is on the side of the poor and oppressed to reshape fundamentally our culturally conditioned theology and our unbiblically one-sided programs and institutions. If that happens, we will forge a new, truly evangelical theology of liberation that will alter the course of history.

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