



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

## **Missiology**

### **Lesson 20 – Liberation Theology as a Threat to Christian Missions**

The true Gospel of Jesus Christ is a message of liberation for all the sinners in the world. The true Gospel informs them that Jesus has liberated them from sin, death, hell, and Satan by His suffering on the cross in place of all sinful mankind and by His triumphant resurrection. The Holy Spirit uses this message to work in the hearts of individual sinners to create faith in Jesus Christ and the beginning of a new spiritual life that desires to please God in its thoughts, words, and deeds. As individuals are turned by God from unbelief and ungodliness to faith in Christ and given the fruits of faith, the nation in which these individuals live and work is gradually changed also. But there will always be opposition to the Gospel of Christ in this world, and the world as such will always remain evil.

Liberation theology has something different in mind. It is not interested in changing individuals through the means of grace and the gradual growth in godliness that is a fruit of faith. Liberation theology got its start in South America in the 1960s. The problem in South America and Central America has been the huge gulf between the very few who are very rich and the very many who are very poor. Many of the leaders in both church and state were among the very rich and did little or nothing to help those who were very poor. The teachers of liberation theology believed this situation should change. They believed that the Christian Church should act on behalf of the poor and oppressed and strive to eliminate oppression and poverty by any means necessary, including social revolution. In their view, churches, both Catholic and Protestant, should help overthrow the economic and political structures of the country in order to liberate the people from poverty.

This was not the method or mission of Jesus, His apostles, or the early Church. They worked by means of the Gospel to change the hearts of individuals. They did not seek to change the political and economic structures of the Roman Empire or of the Jewish culture. The apostle Paul did not start a campaign in his congregations to bring to an end the institution of slavery or to bring to an end the practice of crucifixion. These things gradually did come to an end when more people became Christians.

In its desire to bring down the power structure of a nation and give the power to the poor and oppressed, liberation theology is similar to the philosophy of Karl Marx. Various social revolutions in countries such as China and Russia and Cuba have succeeded in bringing down those who had been in power. But the usual result is that the leaders of the revolution become the new people in power, and they again take advantage of those under them. When hearts are not changed, nothing much changes, except that different people gain control.

In the days of Martin Luther, the peasants (poor farmers) wanted Luther to be their champion and bring down the structures that were oppressing them. But Luther preached the Law and Gospel to both the peasants and their overlords; he called attention to the sins of both classes and proclaimed the Gospel of *spiritual* liberation to both classes. What Luther preached was a spiritual reformation and a spiritual liberation, not a political or a social rebellion. In doing this, he was following the direction and example of Jesus and His apostles.

Another movement that is similar in nature to liberation theology is the “social gospel” movement in North America and elsewhere. Leaders in this movement also believe that the churches should take the lead in improving conditions in this world by changing the social order by acting together as a group. In fact, mission work in these churches emphasizes stirring people up to make changes in their government, culture, and economics, rather than emphasizing the preaching the Gospel of Christ.

To this very day many denominations and federations of church bodies are more interested in social work than they are in the preaching of the Gospel. Social and political matters are the topics of their sermons and their conventions. The National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches have also been heavily involved in social and political questions. Liberation theology likewise is more interested in social and political change than in Christian doctrine.

All the old liberation theologians were socialists. They did not accept the Bible as the inerrant Word of God. They did not accept the concept of propositional truth. They believed in the inherent goodness of each human being. They did not present Jesus as the one sacrifice for human sin, but they presented Jesus as a revolutionary martyr for a cause. Liberation theology promised liberation but delivered continued enslavement to sin and death.

Liberation theology seems to be a close relative of any theology that takes up the cause of what is perceived to be an oppressed minority. Today we have radicals pushing feminist theology and wanting to overthrow the structures that have kept women from positions of power. What God says about the roles of men and women is ignored and despised. In matters of sex and gender there are those who believe homosexual men and women have been oppressed in the past and need liberation. This is a definite example of calling good evil and evil good, something clearly condemned in Isaiah 5:20: **“Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil.”**

Liberation theology tries to involve the church of Jesus Christ in matters of politics, economics, and social structure. But Jesus told His Church to preach the Gospel. As a church, we are forbidden to use earthly methods such as political force or governmental power or violent revolution.

The Augsburg Confession discusses such matters in Article XXVIII: *“One should not mix or confuse the two authorities, the spiritual and the secular. For spiritual power has its*

*command to preach the gospel and to administer the sacraments. It should not invade an alien office. It should not set up and depose kings. It should not annul or disrupt secular law and obedience to political authority, It should not make or prescribe laws for the secular power concerning secular affairs”* (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 92). Bible passages quoted in this presentation were 2 Corinthians 10:4: **“The weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds”** and Philippians 3:20: **“For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”**

Likewise, the *Brief Statement* of 1932 says in #34: *“The Church may not employ any other means than the preaching of the Word of God.”*

The *Statement of Faith and Purpose* of the Church of the Lutheran Confession likewise says in Section I: *“We reject the idea of some that the main work of the church is to promote political and social causes. Our right of existence as a church body has been established by our Lord’s commission to ‘preach the gospel to every creature’ (Mark 16:15). Therefore we are committed to say with the Apostle Paul: ‘I am determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified’ (1 Corinthians 2:2). As individuals, Christians will show fruits of their faith by concern for social and political issues, letting their light shine before others to the glory of God.”*

Does this mean that we have no concern for the poor and the needy? Of course not! The congregation at Jerusalem did what they could to help the poor in their midst. The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy about the care of the poor widows. Luther advised congregations in his vicinity to set up funds of money that could be used to help the poor and needy. Many of our congregations also have some organized way of helping the poor and the needy, first our brothers and sisters in the Christian faith, and then also others in the community as we are able. It is written: **“Let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith”** (Galatians 6:9-10).

## Questions

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1. In what way is the Gospel of Christ a message of liberation?
2. Where did the so-called liberation theology get its start?
3. What kind of liberation does this liberation theology emphasize?
4. Why can we be sure that Paul did not follow the tenets of this theology?
5. In what way does liberation theology follow the views of Karl Marx?
6. What did the peasants in Germany hope that Martin Luther would do?
7. What happens to the power structure after almost every social revolution?
8. Which groups in our day have adopted liberation theology as their method?
9. What do our Lutheran confessions say about the use of worldly methods?
10. How can Christians help the poor and needy in their midst?
11. What example of helping the poor is given us in the New Testament?