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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SOME HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES FOUND IN LATIN AMERICAN THEOLOGIES OF LIBERATION

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The purpose of this article is to point out some negative elements in the hermeneutics of Latin American theologies of liberation.¹ Although Latin American liberation theologies are far from unified in approach and emphases, they nevertheless share some general hermeneutical principles.²

It is not possible within the scope of one article to analyze the complete hermeneutical process at work in Latin American theologies of liberation. Therefore the areas I have chosen for examination are limited to the following: the prefacing of theological research with socio-economic analysis, the concept of a preferential option for the poor, liberation theologians' claim of an epistemological privilege for the poor, universalism, the tendency toward exemplaristic handling of the Biblical text, and experience as the criterion for evaluating truth.

I. THEOLOGY'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC LENS

The point of departure in the theological enterprise for Latin American liberation theologians is not the Biblical text but the social context, thus prompting H. Assmann to declare that "the text is our situation."³ This

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¹ Due to space limitation positive emphases, approaches and contributions to hermeneutical discussions among liberation theologians were not included in this article. A number of positive and constructive elements include the following: (1) pointing out that exegetes and theologians need to be careful to examine the presuppositions and ideologies they bring to the Biblical text, (2) pointing out the strong connection that must exist between exegesis and application, (3) pointing out the important role the laity have in the theological process, (4) stressing the importance of people wrestling with the meaning of Scripture together rather than allowing exegesis to be primarily an individualistic activity.

² The phrase "liberation theologies" is used here and throughout the paper along with "theologies of liberation" in recognition of the diversity that exists within the hermeneutical approach of those who would label themselves, or would be commonly labeled by others, as "liberation theologians." J. Miranda and J. Segundo, for instance, are both commonly referred to as liberation theologians. But Miranda's dialectical method is quite a different approach to doing theology from that of Segundo's hermeneutical circle. For a detailed comparison of their methods see chap. 6 of E. Nuñez, *Liberation Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1985).

³ H. Assmann, *Theology for a Nomad Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976) 54-55.

means that prior to approaching the Bible, Latin American liberation theologians preface their work by reflecting on conditions in their communities and their continent. This is done for at least two reasons: (1) to search for the Bible's relevance to the contemporary situation; (2) to strengthen the thesis of liberation theologians that underdevelopment is not simply economic setback or primitivism.⁴ Liberation theologians believe that underdevelopment results from dependence on developed countries. Thus liberation theologians conclude that all Christians, whether in underdeveloped countries or in highly developed countries, should assume a new posture in their theological reflection by taking into account the poverty "imposed on Latin America by outside sources."⁵ The importance to liberation theologians of examining one's social context as the first step in doing theology can be noted from the fact that over twelve percent of the pages in J. Miranda's major works (*Marx and the Bible* and *Being and the Messiah*) are devoted to a discussion of socio-economic and political issues. Similarly G. Gutiérrez begins his magnum opus, *A Theology of Liberation*, with a discussion of the meaning of development.⁶

In their examination of the world around them, Latin American liberation theologians like S. Galilea emphasize that "the Latin American context (is one) of poverty, dependence and underdevelopment"⁷ by pointing out facts like these: The total annual income of the average family in Latin America averages around one thousand dollars, compared to the thirty-thousand-dollar annual median income of a family in the United States. In Brazil the poorest twenty percent of the population only receive two percent of the national income, whereas the top ten percent account for half of the national income—a fact that is mirrored in other Latin American countries.⁸ Liberation theologians also document issues such as the lack of running water, a shortage of food, and limited educational opportunities for millions who live in Latin America.

This practice of making existing social and political conditions the necessary lens for viewing and interpreting Scriptural data, while on the surface appearing to be just harmless fact-finding, is actually a practice that has concrete hermeneutical implications. If humanity's factual historical condition is to be considered the necessary starting point for doing theology, then from the outset faith gains a political dimension and reference because Biblical reflection becomes directed toward a prestipulated social reconstruction regardless of whether the text may have originally indicated anything to that effect. By employing this hermeneutical practice liberation theologians can readily color, limit, and even subvert the Scripturally given

⁴ E. Weir, "The Bible and Marx," *SJT* 35 (1982) 337-350

⁵ Nuñez, *Liberation* 132 This new posture, a preferential option for the poor, is described below

⁶ Weir, "Bible" For further examples see also J. M. Bonino, *Revolutionary Theology Comes of Age* (London: SPCK, 1975) 1-36, Assmann, *Theology*

⁷ S. Galilea, *Teología de la liberación ensayo de síntesis* (Bogotá: Indo-American Press Service, 1973) 17

⁸ A. F. McGovern, *Liberation Theology and Its Critics* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989) 24-25 For a more complete statistical explanation of the social and economic situation in Latin America see M. Novak, *Will It Liberate?* (New York: Paulist, 1986) 96-105

revelation because a lens through which the Bible is examined necessarily presupposes a range of issues to which the examined text must speak.⁹ To avoid this, theological reflection ought to begin with the text itself rather than one's social context.

II. A PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR

Liberation theologians also study their impoverished communities so that, having gained an understanding of poverty, they can then approach their theological task with a preferential option for the poor. In the tradition of R. Bultmann, who elucidated the principle "kein Verstandnis ohne Vorverstandnis," theologians of liberation assert that creative interpretation involves and necessitates the adoption of a clear political, sociological and theological stance for the poor, a partiality that is consciously accepted.¹⁰ This approach differs significantly from the approach of many scholars in recent decades who employ historical-critical methods to interpret the Biblical text and value the goal of objectivity.¹¹ Liberation theologians, however, assert that deliberate partiality is not a new approach in interpreting the Scriptures. Some maintain, for instance, that J. Wesley approached the theological task with a preferential option for the poor and used the advancement of the cause of the poor as a yardstick for measuring personal lifestyle, church programs and government policy.¹² By "the poor" liberation theologians do not mean just those who are economically disadvantaged. Rather, as L. Boff makes clear, "the poor" includes anyone who is oppressed for any reason, including race, ethnic origin, or sex.¹³ It includes blacks, indigenous peoples and women.¹⁴

A justification for adopting a preferential option for the poor is presented by Gutiérrez.¹⁵ He asserts that in adopting a preferential option for

⁹ C F H Henry, "Liberation Theology and the Scriptures," *Liberation Theology* (ed R Nash, Milford Mott, 1984) 196-197

¹⁰ Weir, "Bible"

¹¹ It is generally recognized among those who employ historical-critical methods that complete impartiality is impossible because human beings are fallible. As C E Gudorf wrote in "Liberation Theology's Use of Scripture" (*Int* 41 [1987] 5-18), "differences in class, culture, sex, race, and personal experience all affect the questions we take with us to the scripture." Nevertheless, objectivity is ardently pursued and highly valued by many. For a discussion of objectivity's importance and necessity by one who practices the historical-critical method see E Krentz, *The Historical Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 70-71. Cf also E D Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University, 1967) 1-23.

¹² See e.g. W Jennings, Jr., "Wesley's Preferential Option for the Poor," *Quarterly Review* 9 (1989) 10-29

¹³ For a more complete description see L Boff and C Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987) 28-30

¹⁴ For an in-depth exploration of the idea of poverty and the meaning of "poor" in the Bible see *TDNT* 4:885-915. For an argument that "poor" in the NT does not primarily refer to those who are economically disadvantaged but to those who in affliction have confidence in God see *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (ed C Brown, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971) 2:824-828

¹⁵ G Gutiérrez, "Liberation and the Poor: The Puebla Perspective," *Third World Liberation Theologies: An Introductory Survey* (ed D W Ferm, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986) 34-37

the poor when interpreting the Bible the exegete is mirroring Christ's action of leaving the glory of heaven to live and work among the poor. Also the preference for the poor is based on "the fact that God, as Christ shows us, loves them (the poor) for their concrete, real conditions of poverty whatever may be their moral or spiritual disposition." Gutiérrez concludes his justification for this principle by quoting words Pope John Paul II spoke in the barrio of Santa Cecilia on January 30, 1979: "You, being poor, have a special right to my special concern and attention. . . . The Pope loves you because you are God's favorites." Gutiérrez suggests that as the Pope favors the poor, so God loves the poor more than the nonpoor.

Such "justification" warrants some examination. Gutiérrez' first assertion that a preinterpretive preference for the poor mirrors the action of Christ's coming down to live and work among the poor is faulty due to his implicit assertion that Christ did not come to minister to the nonpoor. Although it is true that most of Christ's ministry was among the poor, at no time in Scripture is it ever stated that his ministry excluded the nonpoor. In fact the gospel writers disclose that within his intimate group of twelve disciples there was a "middle class" tax gatherer (Matt 9:9), that Jesus fellowshiped with and ministered to the religious and social elite (John 3:1-9; 5:46 ff.), and that he counted the wealthy among his followers (Matt 27:57). Since Christ's ministry was among all socio-economic classes it is folly to speak of adopting a preferential interpretative option on behalf of one class.

Due to similarity in argument, Gutiérrez' second and third "justifications" will be examined together. Undoubtedly when Gutiérrez was writing about God loving the poor more than the nonpoor and God loving the poor because of their real, concrete condition of poverty as justifications for theologians adopting a preferential option for the poor, he had in mind verses like Ps 140:12 ("I know that Yahweh secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy") and Isa 25:4, which praises God for being "a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in his distress." These, and similar verses like Isa 4:11; Ps 14:6, do point out that Yahweh has a special concern for those who are socially disadvantaged. Apparently, due to the tendency of those with power to mistreat and take advantage of the poor (cf. Amos 2), Yahweh promised the oppressed special assistance in their temporal struggles. There is, however, a difference between Yahweh's special concern for the poor's physical needs and Yahweh having a special concern for the poor's spiritual needs. Does Yahweh's special attention to the physical needs of the poor described in the OT indicate that he had a salvific concern for the poor that was greater than his concern for the salvation of the nonpoor? It is clear from Scripture that God's salvific concern for individuals extends beyond socio-economic classes, ethnic grouping, sex and any other barrier (Gal 3:28; Rom 2:11). He calls individuals to himself solely on the basis of his mercy. Nowhere in Scripture is it stated that his preference when electing individuals to salvation focuses on the poor to the exclusion of the nonpoor. The main problem with Gutiérrez' assertions that God loves the poor more than the rich and that God loves the poor because they are poor is that he does not distinguish between love that God dem-

onstrates for the poor (regardless of whether they are part of the elect) because of the tendency of the powerful to take advantage of them and the cross-class love that God shows to those he elects to salvation. This is so because a closely related problem is the fact that in Gutiérrez' theology there is no distinction between rescue from physical oppression and salvation from sin. For Gutiérrez, release from oppression is salvation. This confusion of concepts in liberation theologies will be discussed below. For now, suffice it to say that the idea that God has a salvific concern for the poor beyond what he has for others in different socio-economic strata is a belief that is alien to the Bible.

Having critiqued Gutiérrez' justification for adopting the deliberate presupposition of a preferential option for the poor before examining the Biblical text, I now want to comment in a general way about objectivity and presuppositions.¹⁶ Objectivity does not demand neutrality or freedom from presuppositions. As E. Krentz points out, to interpret a document correctly the interpreter must adopt the same mindset as the writer. For example, belief in the supernatural, far from being a presupposition that will inhibit understanding of the Biblical text, is actually essential in order to gain insight into what the writer, a believer in the supernatural, meant to communicate. For the Biblical interpreter, objectivity does not involve adopting a stance that is hostile to the Biblical text. Rather, objectivity for the Biblical interpreter means coming to the Bible presuming that the text has something valid to say that one does not already know and that what the text says will relate to the judging and saving word of God.¹⁷ The problem with Gutiérrez' preferential option for the poor is not that he approached the text with presuppositions. Rather, as demonstrated above, he approached the text with a presupposition and a precommitment that is alien to the Bible. Such an alien presupposition and precommitment would likely lead an exegete to interpret the Bible in a way that the writer never intended the message to be understood, thus violating what E. Betti calls a document's "hermeneutical autonomy."¹⁸ In other words a text has meaning in and of itself, and the exegete must not import meaning into the text but must find the author's sense from the text.¹⁹ It is wrong to insist either explicitly or implicitly by adopting misleading alien presuppositions or precommitments that the text's meaning as intended by the author is unimportant. Such a posture results in reducing Biblical investigation to a simple subjective game of suggestion in which no criterion can be appealed to to prove or disprove one's interpretation, resulting in a confusion of equally "plausible" meanings and the sense of a text being lost in the graveyard of subjectivity.²⁰

¹⁶ Krentz, *Method* 70 See also E. Betti, *Die Hermeneutik als allgemeine Methodik der Geisteswissenschaften* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1962) 53-57, R. Bultmann, "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?", *Existence and Faith* (ed. S. Ogden, New York: Meridian, 1960) 292-295

¹⁷ This conviction can also be noted in Article IX of the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics* "We deny that the message of Scripture derives from, or is dictated by, the interpreter's understanding"

¹⁸ Betti, *Hermeneutik* 14

¹⁹ K. Fror, *Biblische Hermeneutik* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1961) 53-54

²⁰ Hirsch, *Validity* 1-10

III. EPISTEMOLOGICAL PRIVILEGE OF THE POOR

At the same time that liberation theologians assert that the interpreter of the Biblical text ought to adopt a preferential option for the poor so that the cause of the poor can be advanced, they also assert that the poor can assist the Biblical interpreter because they have special epistemological insight.²¹ Assmann first elucidated this principle, which he termed the "epistemological privilege of the struggling poor."²² By this he meant that those who are struggling to free themselves from oppressive situations have special insight into the message of Scripture. Assmann argues for this principle because he insists that the Bible, for the most part, is the work of oppressed peoples living in oppressive situations and writing to oppressed peoples everywhere about how oppression can be overcome, how there can be "liberation," and how God is involved in the process. Since the Bible, then, is primarily about those struggling for freedom from oppression with God's assistance, it therefore follows, Assmann maintains, that those who are in a similar situation of oppression today are likely to understand the heart of the Bible's radical message of justice better than those who approach the same texts from a position of privilege.²³

It may be true that those in a given situation can more readily understand literature written about people in their situation. An evangelical in India, for instance, is more likely to understand readily literature written on her difficulties as a minority in a Hindu nation than, say, an American evangelical. But the assertion underlying this epistemological principle that liberation theologians hold needs further discussion. Is it true that the Bible is primarily about people struggling for freedom from temporal oppression?²⁴

The Bible does contain passages that speak about God leading his people from oppression (e.g. Exodus 13-15; Ezra 1-2) and passages that speak about the need for social justice (e.g. Mic 6:8; Prov 2:3). But the primary message of the Bible is not a promise of liberation from temporal op-

²¹ R M Brown, *Theology in a New Key* (Philadelphia Westminster, 1978) 61 Note a similar theme that is prominent in black theologies of liberation in J Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (New York Lippincott, 1970) 90-96 A similar theme can be noted implicitly in E Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York Crossroad, 1986)

²² Although Assmann's principle is commonly referred to in literature related to theologies of liberation, it is never footnoted—nor can I find it explicitly stated in his works I assume that since R M Brown, for instance ("The Preferential Option for the Poor and the Renewal of Faith," *Churches in Struggle* [ed W K Tobb, New York Monthly Review, 1986] 7-17, *Theology in a New Key* 61), credits the principle to Assmann twice, the source (verbal?) is not in doubt For a discussion of the principle and its relation to postmodern epistemology see D S Cunningham, "Boff on Theology," *Modern Theology* 6 (1990) 137-158, P Frostin, "The Hermeneutics of the Poor," *ST* 39 (1985) 151-169

²³ Brown, "Preferential Option"

²⁴ It is interesting to note that liberation theologians who have occasionally accused evangelicals and other traditionalists of spiritualizing calls for liberation from oppression have themselves spiritualized (or, better, despiritualized) the Bible's message of liberation from the punishment of death and sin Cf e.g J Comblin's words in *The Church and the National Security State* (Maryknoll Orbis, 1979) 215 "The strategy of liberation is to support all true movements for the liberation of people by undertaking their struggles and sufferings, their slavery and hope,

pression. It is an explanation of Christ's sacrificial death as the means of liberation from sin's effects and thus the means of providing eternal life.²⁵ Although the space cannot be taken to examine every book of the Bible to prove this assertion, some brief comments on a few books is appropriate. John, for instance, reveals his purpose for writing his gospel in John 20:31 when he says, "These are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you might have life in his name." John communicates here that he wove his material together to convince his reader to put his or her trust in Christ's ability to give new life, which was identified in 3:15–17 as eternal life.²⁶ Likewise in Romans Paul's key theme was not liberation from oppression but justification by faith that provides eternal life. Even a cursory reading of the text makes this clear (cf. Rom 1:16–17; 3:23–24; 5:12–21; 9:35–39; etc.).²⁷ Similarly Deuteronomy sets forth laws that primarily guide Israel's spiritual life (cf. Deut 5:1–21; 12:1–4; 12:5–16:17) and are designed to make clear the requirements of a covenant God initiated, at least in part, to make people aware of their need for salvation from sin (Rom 5:20).²⁸ Finally, even in the prophets,²⁹ which are primarily concerned with pointing out that God wants to be Israel's sole object of devotion—for he promises and delivers judgment when they abandon him (Joel 2–3; Obad 15 ff.; Zeph 1:4 ff.) and blessing when they follow him (Ezekiel 37; Amos 9:13 ff.; Hos 2:14 ff.)—one can note glimpses of God's plan to rescue humans from deserved punishment for sin

their rebellion and martyrdom. It recognizes Christ's salvation in the popular movements." Note also Assmann, *Theology* 86 "The theology of liberation, as an effective process of critical reflection on historical practice, will have to go back to the theology of the cross. It will have to strip it of the alienating mystifications that have accrued to it. The most obvious of these would seem to be the 'theory of satisfaction,' pushed to the extreme of the scapegoat who died for those who project on to him their own cowardice and failure to rise to the challenge of their historical responsibilities, another is the theory of 'reconciler' who pacifies everything and tries to avoid any sort of conflict. It will have to give back to the man Jesus his full integrity as a human being and give his death the historical and political meaning that in fact it possessed." R. Haight, *An Alternative Vision* (New York: Paulist, 1985) 22, points out that in liberationologies there is a close relationship between liberation and salvation, and in many cases they are identical.

²⁵ For an in-depth exploration of the idea that salvation from sin's punishment, death and hell is the central theme of the Bible see S. Mikolaski, "The Theology of the New Testament," *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (ed. F. Gaebelen, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 1:459–480, D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1981) 49–58.

²⁶ For further comment on John 20:31 and its significance see G. R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (Waco: Word, 1987) 387, C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 575–576.

²⁷ For a discussion of the idea that justification by faith is the central theme of Romans see J. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (Dallas: Word, 1988) lix, W. Sanday and A. Headlam, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1902) xxxvi.

²⁸ P. C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 30–32, A. D. H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy* (Greenwood: Attic, 1979) 55–58.

²⁹ Note that while the theme of the promise of a Messiah to provide eternal life is rarely stated explicitly in the OT, hints are common throughout the text (Gen 3:15, Job 19:25–27, Psalm 89, Isa 25:6–12, Mal 3:3).

(cf. esp. Isaiah 53–54; Isa 7:14; Jer 31:31–34; Mal 3:3).³⁰ Since therefore the case for an “epistemological privilege of the struggling poor” is based on a mistaken notion of what the principal message of the Bible is, this element of liberation hermeneutics ought to be dismissed as faulty.

IV. UNIVERSALISM

As has been noted by many critics of liberation theologies,³¹ theologians of liberation stress social activism and engagement to the exclusion of what evangelicals call “evangelism.”³² The gospel of liberation from sin and hell has been reduced to a gospel of liberation from oppression and economic disparity for all who suffer. Gutiérrez confirms this when he says that the goal of theology is “a socialist society, more just, free and human.”³³ This orientation can, in large part, be traced to another alien presupposition that has been brought to the Biblical text and that results in a distortion of its teachings.

A hermeneutical presupposition that is widely espoused in theologies of liberation is universalism, the belief that all human beings, without exception, will eventually attain salvation.³⁴ Gutiérrez makes clear his adoption of this position when he says that everyone, Christian or not, “is saved if he opens himself to God and to others, even if he is not clearly aware that he is doing so.”³⁵ This presupposition of universalism is often implicit in many liberation theologies when they do not make any distinction between those who are and are not the people of God. J. Miranda, for instance, writes at length concerning what being saved from oppression is all about. But he never once asks the question, “Who is it that is being saved?”³⁶ The unstated assumption, of course, is that all are saved. As S. Knapp has said of liberation theologians: “The people of God, for them, has lost any sense of particularity.”³⁷ If all are saved and all humans are the people of God, then

³⁰ For a discussion of central themes in the prophets see D. Stuart, *Hosea Jonah* (Waco Word, 1990).

³¹ See comments in Henry, “Liberation” 198, J. A. Kirk, *Liberation Theology An Evangelical View From the Third World* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979) 202.

³² Liberation theologians of course use the word evangelism to denote something quite different from the presentation of the salvific message of Jesus Christ in such a way that the listener can make the choice whether he or she will recognize Christ as Lord and Savior. Segundo, for example, minimizes the concrete need for both a personal act of conversion and faith in the gospel together with membership in the Church. He defines evangelism in terms of making a superficial Christian aware of the total liberating dimension of the gospel as good news today (*Masas y minorias en la dialectica divina de la liberacion* [Buenos Aires: Editorial la Aurora, 1973] 7–9). Likewise Gutiérrez emphasizes the conscientization aspect of evangelism by highlighting the situation of exploitation that is “contrary to the Gospel and based on human-created injustices” (*Praxis of Liberation and Christian Faith* [San Antonio: n.p., 1974] 48–55).

³³ G. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973) 274.

³⁴ See N. T. Wright, “Universalism,” *New Dictionary of Theology* (ed. S. B. Ferguson and D. B. Wright, Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988) 701–703.

³⁵ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* 151.

³⁶ J. Miranda, *Marx and the Bible* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1974) 41–63.

³⁷ S. Knapp, “A Preliminary Dialogue with Gutiérrez’ *A Theology of Liberation*,” *Evangelicals and Liberation* (ed. C. Armerding, Nutley: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977) 21–38.

it would be senseless to direct one's energy toward challenging people regarding their eternal state. It therefore follows that if it is senseless to direct one's energy toward sacred and spiritual affairs, then one's energy ought to be directed to temporal and earthly affairs as it is in liberation theologies.

The Bible, however, does not teach that everyone will be saved. On the contrary, there are many who are not the people of God and will face hell following death. The Bible speaks of those who are "shut out of the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power" (2 Thess 1:9), of those who face shame and everlasting contempt (Dan 12:2; Isa 66:24). The Bible also speaks of the futility of life apart from God (Eccl 1:2, 14; Mark 8:26; Luke 9:25), thus implying that there are those who are not children of God. The Bible also talks about the wrath of God (John 3:36; Rom 2:5, 8; Eph 2:3; Heb 10:27) and the darkness (Matt 8:12; 22:13; 25:30) that those who are not saved will face.³⁸

The presupposition of universalism is alien to the Bible. When brought to the Biblical text it can easily result in a distortion of Biblical interpretation as well as confusion in the goals and priorities of the theologians of liberation.

V. EXEMPLARISTIC INTERPRETATION

As noted above, liberation theologies have sought to approach Biblical study from the perspective of the oppressed. This commitment has affected the way liberation theologians have handled the Biblical text.³⁹ Frequently, exegetical efforts have focused on using the Biblical account as a model or paradigm to encourage contemporary action to relieve the plight of the poor.⁴⁰ This has commonly led to exemplarism—dissolving Biblical history into isolated Bible stories, each with its own individual moral and ethical example that should be followed in the present day.⁴¹ Perhaps the classic example of exemplarism in the writings of liberation theologians is Gutiérrez' use of the account of the deliverance of the people of Israel from slavery recorded in the book of Exodus. After pointing out how the Israelites escaped from bondage in Egypt,⁴² Gutiérrez asserts that this act is a paradigm for contemporary action and that as the Israelites "released themselves" from servitude so today humanity must transform the world, break out of servitude, build a just society, and assume its destiny in history.⁴³

³⁸ R Nicole, "Universalism Will Everyone Be Saved?", *Christianity Today* (March 20, 1987) 32-39

³⁹ H M Conn, "Liberation Theology," *New Dictionary of Theology*

⁴⁰ As pointed out earlier, "the poor" for liberation theologians means all those who are oppressed in any way

⁴¹ The tendency toward exemplarism has been noted by several scholars including J Franke, *De Jongste Theologie* (Groningen De Vuurbaak, 1975), A G Honig, *Jesus Christus, de Beu ryder* (Kampen Kok, 1975)

⁴² Gutiérrez, *Theology* 155-159

⁴³ *Ibid* 159 Note the failure to recognize that God was behind the exodus (Exod 12 51), thus placing the sole responsibility of contemporary "liberation" on the shoulders of humans For a

Although there are rare occasions when the Bible uses earlier redemptive history by way of example when prescribing behavior for the people of God, there is never a simple equation between past action and the action that is called for. For example, although NT Christians in 1 Corinthians 10 are warned to avoid the rebelliousness of the Israelites during their desert journey, they are also told that upon them "the end of the ages" has come (1 Cor 10:11). Thus Paul's argument is not from example alone. Similarly in Hebrews 11 the point the author is trying to make is not simply to persevere because the heroes and heroines of the faith did. Rather, if such figures could persevere while not having received "the promise" (Heb 11:13), how much more could the Hebrews persevere since they possessed something in its incipient fulfillment (11:40).

Typically, when the Bible looks back on itself (e.g. Joshua 24; 1 Samuel 12) it does not stress past human faith and conduct. Rather, the focus of the backward glance is on God's actions in history, the recollection of which results in people being moved to repentance. When the Israelites heard Joshua recount redemptive history they did not say, "We should do what Abraham our forefather did and said." They said, "Far be it from us to forsake Yahweh to serve other gods. It was Yahweh himself who brought us . . . up out of Egypt. . . . He protected us . . . and drove out before us all the nations. . . . We too will serve Yahweh, because he is our God" (Josh 24:16-18).

Exemplaristic interpretation tends to focus on humans and not on God. It is psychologizing and subjectivistic. The use of Scripture in this manner reveals an attempt to justify one's desire to promote revolution based on handling the Biblical text in a manner the Bible itself never hints at rather than to trace the history of salvation so that God will be exalted and Christians will be led to serve him in a new and deeper manner.⁴⁴

VI. EXPERIENCE AS THE CRITERION FOR EVALUATING TRUTH

It was mentioned earlier that the starting point of Latin American theologies of liberation is the Latin American social and political situation, which according to liberation theologians is the necessary lens for viewing and interpreting the Scriptures. What about the finishing point of Latin American theologies of liberation? What is the criterion that determines if theology is correct? What is the standard against which truth claims are measured? To examine the answers that theologians of liberation provide to these questions, the thought of Gutiérrez, Assmann and Sobrino on this issue will be briefly examined.

The answer to the above questions, according to Gutiérrez, is that "the true interpretation of the meaning revealed by theology is achieved only in

further criticism of liberation theology's use of the exodus see J H Yoder's comments on liberation theology's selective use of Scripture in "Exodus Probing the Meaning of Liberation," *Sojourners* (September 1976) 27-29

⁴⁴ M Woudstra, "A Critique of Liberation Theology," *JETS* 23 (1980) 4-12

historical praxis.⁴⁵ In order to understand his assertion it is necessary to understand what he means by both "theology" and "praxis." By "praxis" Gutiérrez does not mean simply action or activism in opposition to theory. Rather, he is thinking of a dialectic between theory and activity that results in one's beliefs and actions shaping each other while one interacts with the surrounding socio-economic milieu.⁴⁶ "Theology" for Gutiérrez does not mean orthodoxy or Biblical truths that have been established once and for all. This he perceives as "static and, in the long run, sterile."⁴⁷ Theology for Gutiérrez is something that "both grows and in a certain sense changes"—a truth "which is along the way."⁴⁸ In sum, then, Gutiérrez teaches that since theology is progressive, variable and unfinished, containing no absolutes, its validity is determined by the results one notes when examining the "effectiveness" one's dialectic of thought and activity brings to the goal of "liberation." Experience is the hermeneutical criterion by which Gutiérrez suggests truth be evaluated.

Assmann also rejects the Bible as a hermeneutical criterion to judge truth. He asserts that its text "has come down to us formed, deformed, reformed, and deformed yet again by the actual history of Christianity."⁴⁹ He also rejects creeds and historical interpretations as valid means to measure the truthfulness of a theological assertion.⁵⁰ The views of Biblical exegetes are also rejected as a means of establishing what truth is. He says, "The usual views of exegetes who work on the sacred text are of little use to us, because we want to work on the reality of today."⁵¹ For Assmann "no message is valid unless it is made true in practice."⁵² Like Gutiérrez, then, Assmann rejects an objective standard to analyze the validity of theological assertions. One's experience is the means of evaluating truth.⁵³

Unlike Assmann, J. Sobrino does not totally reject Biblical study as a means by which truth can be discovered. Sobrino says that he approaches the Biblical text with an exegetical interest because he believes it can contribute to the "liberation" effort. He focuses his Biblical study on Christology because he maintains that if one truly understands Christ one will work for the "liberation" of the poor. But to fully understand Christ, Sobrino argues, one must go beyond exegetical research because following Jesus is a condition for knowing him—that is, only from the point of view of Christian praxis is it possible to draw near to Christ. Just as he argued

⁴⁵ Gutiérrez, *Theology* 13

⁴⁶ M L Lamb, "Praxis," *The New Dictionary of Theology* (ed J A Komonchak, M Collins and D A Lane, Wilmington Michael Glazier, 1987) 784–787

⁴⁷ Gutiérrez, *Theology* 10 In expressing this viewpoint Gutiérrez (*Theology* 244 n 62) quotes approvingly the words of J B Metz "The so-called fundamental hermeneutic problem of theology is not the problem of how systematic theology stands in relation to historical theology but what is the relation between theory and practice, between understanding the faith and social practice"

⁴⁸ Gutiérrez, *Theology* 10, 12–13

⁴⁹ Assmann, *Theology* 60–61, 63

⁵⁰ *Ibid* 64, 76

⁵¹ *Ibid* 76, 80

⁵² *Ibid* 80, 105

⁵³ Nuñez, *Liberation* 147

that experience is the means by which Christ is known, so Sobrino also argues that experience is the means by which truth is known.⁵⁴ He says, "Orthodoxy can be rendered concrete and Christian only through a specific praxis. . . . Viewed from the standpoint of praxis, the ultimate supremacy of praxis over orthodoxy is evident."⁵⁵

Gutiérrez, Assmann and Sobrino, though differing slightly in their argument, all agree that experience should be the final judge when one questions the validity of exegetical or theological beliefs. In stressing the role of experience, liberation theologians have reminded others of the close link that should exist between belief and action and the fact that belief ought to be worked out practically. Their emphasis brings to mind James' directive that authentic faith should produce works (Jas 2:14-26). It also calls attention to Christ's words: "If you love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). Still, elevating experience to the level of truth evaluator is a very dangerous decision, for experience is changeable, ambiguous, and open to self-deception.

A far better approach when evaluating truth claims would be to adopt the historic Protestant view that insists that Scripture is the norm against which truth claims are measured and the ultimate judge between conflicting assertions of theological truth. This principle of *sola Scriptura* is superior to relying on one's experience when judging truth for three key reasons. (1) It is superior because it recognizes that since Scripture is the only written record God has given to his people,⁵⁶ it thus contains all the Church needs to know to guide it in seeking truth and evaluating truth claims. (2) Scripture ought to be the judge of beliefs and assertions because Christ appealed to Scripture as the standard against which truth claims were to be judged. In Matthew 4, for instance, three times Jesus judged Satan's words against what Scripture taught. In Matthew 15, Jesus judged the traditions of the elders against Scriptural teaching. (3) A final reason why Scripture ought to judge claims of truth is because the NT writers frequently argued for their position by citing Scripture (e.g. Rom 9:12-17, 25-26; 2 Cor 6:16-17; Eph 5:31; Heb 10:16-17; 1 Pet 3:10-12) and not by appealing to experience, tradition or any other "authority." Their use of Scripture demonstrates not only their recognition that their readers in the early Church perceived Scripture as the judge of truth but also their belief that Scripture is the measure of theological (and behavioral) correctness.

VII. CONCLUSION

In spite of a few positive elements in the hermeneutical practice of Latin American liberation theologians, by and large the elements of their methodology explored in this paper are misguided and can lead to the dis-

⁵⁴ Ibid 148-150

⁵⁵ J Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (Maryknoll Orbis, 1978) 390-391

⁵⁶ Space does not exist here for a lengthy proof of this assertion. For such a discussion see M Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids Baker, 1985) 175-198

tortion of the original sense of the Biblical text. Beginning theological reflection by examining one's socio-economic milieu is inappropriate because it imposes a set of interpretive blinders on the exegete that precondition him or her to view a text as background support for a socialist agenda. So too the idea of the exegete adopting presuppositions that are alien to the Bible is to be rejected because it can cause the exegete to arrive at conclusions that are foreign to the author's intended message. The exemplaristic use of Scripture often necessarily obscures the author's intended sense of a text because it is so subjective. The use of experience as the judge of truth may be the most dangerous practice in the hermeneutical system employed by theologians of liberation. Many errors in belief that are arrived at as a result of mistaken hermeneutical practices or assumptions could be caught and corrected if one believed that Scripture is the final judge of what is appropriate belief and activity. By adopting the idea that experience should be the judge of truth, liberation theologians have robbed themselves of any objective standard with which they can check themselves. They thus seal their belief and practices forever in the black hole of subjectivity.

If the blatant worldwide social and economic failures of socialist states were not enough to convince one that some central goals of theologies of liberation are impractical and misguided, this study of some elements of the hermeneutical methodology of liberation theologians should cause exegetes to take a long hard look at Latin American liberation theologies before embracing them.