

A Hermeneutic of Hope

Gustavo Gutiérrez¹
with an introduction by Fernando F. Segovia²

Vanderbilt University

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¹ Gustavo Gutiérrez is the acclaimed author of *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, Salvation*.

² Fernando F. Segovia is the Oberlin Graduate Professor of New Testament at Vanderbilt.

Introduction: The Elegant Cry of Commitment

Fernando F. Segovia, Ph.D.

THE TASK OF INTRODUCTION

entrusted to me is one to be cherished deeply, and so I do indeed, but it is by no means an easy one. How, I ask myself, does one introduce the figure and role of Gustavo Gutiérrez?

The tradition of celebratory introductions such as this one calls for a pointed and generous review of the speaker's life experience, educational trajectory, academic achievements, and professional distinctions. How can anyone possibly convey the achievements of Father Gutiérrez in any one of these areas, let alone all four? This would mean beginning in the 1940s with his early years as a student of medicine at the National University of San Carlos in Lima and his involvement in the then-prominent movement of Catholic Action. This would also entail concluding with the summer of 2010 itself, with the conferral upon him of the honorary degree of *Magister Sacrae Theologiae*, or Master of Sacred

* During Vanderbilt University's year-long commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of Liberation Theology, the Reverend Professor Doctor Gustavo Gutiérrez, a member of the Order of Preachers and the holder of the John Cardinal O'Hara Chair in the department of theology at the University of Notre Dame, served as the keynote lecturer. We are pleased to publish a transcribed version of Father Gutiérrez' lecture, sponsored by the University's Center for Latin American Studies, as well as the introduction by Fernando F. Segovia, the Oberlin Graduate Professor of New Testament. The text of Father Gutiérrez' lecture was transcribed by Zacharey Austin Carmichael, BA'10, MA'12, MDiv3.

Theology, on the part of his own Order of Preachers, an ancient university degree bestowed on such Dominican luminaries as Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas and reserved today for theologians deemed eminent in the promotion of theological studies through doctrinal reflection and research as well as publications of exceptional value. In between, moreover, it would mean summarizing an ecclesial and academic life of truly heroic proportions:

—Sustained pivotal involvement in the church Catholic Roman as well as the church catholic universal, from the years of the Second Vatican Council through the present, with the recently concluded celebration of the five-hundredth anniversary of the presence of the Order of Preachers in the New World, which took place during October 2010 in the Dominican Republic.

—A distinguished philosophical and theological education at the Catholic University of Leuven and the University of Lyons, respectively, and the founder of the San Bartolomé de Las Casas Institute in Rimac, Lima.

—An untold number of key publications and lectures, of which *The Theology of Liberation: Perspectives*—published in 1971—stands as an undisputed classic.

—A host of honors, including more than twenty honorary doctoral degrees and the 2003 Award in Communications and Humanities given by the Príncipe de Asturias Foundation, headed by the heir to the throne of Spain.

Rather than attempting to do so in greater detail, let me offer instead a personal vision of the life and work of Gustavo Gutiérrez. For me, Father Gutiérrez represents an imperative marker of the religious and theological production of Christianity since that fateful decade of the 1960s. His name and his labor signify in exemplary fashion a turning era in church and theology as well as in society and culture. This was an era that began with two events that took place within days of one another in January of 1959: on the one hand, the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, with all of its consequences for Latin America in particular and for the Third World in general, still very much unfolding; on the other hand, the call of John XXIII for a new ecumenical council, the Second Vatican Council, with all of its ramifications for the Catholic Church in particular and for the Christian church in general, still very much unfolding as well. Since then, throughout the intervening fifty years, Father Gutiérrez has been the voice of a visionary, foundational, and critical thinker.

A visionary thinker, first of all, because he brought into the optic of theological reflection and construction a number of components that have become constitutive of theology since then: a relentless foregrounding of the Other in society and culture, of the poor and the oppressed, as human beings worthy of dignity and life; a view of theology as an act of reflection on practice in the light of the Word of God and thus of theology as a profoundly contextual exercise, materially as well as discursively, yet of universal reach and impact; and the vision and proclamation of a Reign of God that offers liberation and redemption, fullness of life, to all, but above all to those in captivity, the marginalized and the forgotten.

A foundational thinker, secondly, insofar as his voice, as part of its visionary role, helps to pry open the dominance of Western theology on the non-Western world and thus opens the way for contextual theologies of all sorts—from Latin America and the Caribbean, from Africa and the Middle East as well as from Asia and the Pacific, and from minority formations within the West. With and after Liberation, not only does the face of theology change but also its voice, making the theological enterprise perform a global endeavor.

A critical thinker, lastly, given the fact that he has never stopped revisiting, deepening, and recasting his original insights. Anyone who moves from his early study of 1968 “Notes for a Theology of Liberation,” where the term “liberation” appears for the first time (*Theological Studies* 31 [1970] 243-61); through his reflection of 1988 on “Expanding the View,” (*A Theology of Liberation*, Fifteenth Anniversary Edition [Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988], marking the twentieth anniversary of Liberation Theology; to his study of 2003 on “The Theology of Liberation: Perspectives and Tasks” (Fernando F. Segovia, ed., *Toward a New Heaven and A New Earth: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza* [Maryknoll: Orbis Books] 287-299) where he argues that the historical juncture that gave rise to Liberation has by no means disappeared but rather become even more entrenched—anyone, I repeat, who moves through these works realizes that this is a mind ever self-critical, ever shifting, and ever radical.

All of this, I should add, with a unique combination of elegance and humility, erudition and charity, conviction and commitment. To this effect, let me quote the final paragraph of an autobiographical piece, “Theological

Task and Ecclesial Reflection,” written in 2000:

What we have just said above is a consequence of a realization already brought to mind: the peoples of Latin America are, for the most part, poor and believing at the same time. At the very heart of a situation that excludes and ill-treats them, and from which they seek to liberate themselves, the poor believe in the God of Life. As our friends Victor (now deceased) and Irene Chere, townspeople from Villa El Salvador, said to John Paul II during his visit of 1985 to our country, speaking in the name of all the poor of Perú, a million of whom were in attendance: “With our hearts broken by

grief, we see that our wives bear children while ill with tuberculosis, that our children die, that our children grow up weak and without future,” and then added, “but, despite all this, we believe in the God of Life.” This is a context, or even better a vital reality, that a reflection on faith cannot elude. To the contrary, such reflection must find nourishment in it. Unceasingly.

Such nourishment Gustavo Gutiérrez has been imbibing and imparting, unceasingly, for over forty years. That has been his quintessential cry—elegant and humble, erudite and loving, full of conviction and totally committed.

A Hermeneutic of Hope

Gustavo Gutiérrez, O.P.

FORTY YEARS AGO, WE BEGAN speaking in Latin America about liberation theology and how important it was for us “to live liberation,” to be in solidarity with the poor. Reflection is very important also; for the first time in centuries we have theological reflections coming from countries outside of Europe and North America. We have today, theologies coming from Africa and Asia—reflections on the human condition from minorities in the rich countries. Behind these reflections we have movements. We have realities. We have a people committed. We have people killed for their commitments.

In the academic milieu, we were accustomed to theology coming from Europe, and maybe for you younger students of theology, it is not unusual for you today to speak about theologians from different areas of the world or from different social groups in rich countries, but this was not the case when I was a student of theology in the middle of the twentieth century. While the theologies from outside Europe and North America are referred to by the curious expression “contextual theologies,” any theology is contextual. Our ideas are not original, but we believe even today we are confronting important challenges of the Christian life, not only in Latin America, but in the world, and our reflections involve two processes.

The Absent Become Present

The first process comes from human history, from the daily lives of people. In the middle of twentieth century, and in

Latin America at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, we had a new presence—the poor sectors. The poor people of our population were more present than before, and this was a significant challenge not only for theology but for politics and for the democratic nations. The “absent people” became present, more and more, but when I say absent, I mean they were not physically absent from history, but they were not relevant. The poor were more and more present; consequently, a new consciousness about poverty emerged.

For a long time, humanity has seen poverty as a fact and as a fate. This idea, prevalent in the Greek milieu, is ever present among the poor of today who say, “It is a pity, but I was born poor.”

We are then only one logical step away from saying, “It is the Will of God you are poor while other persons are rich.”

We can ask the poor to be humble, to accept their fate, and to be helped by the rich people whose “duty” is to be generous with the poor; however, it remains difficult for humanity, not only for the rich and for the churches, to understand that poverty is the result of “our hands.” Our hands have made poverty, and poverty has causes—social structures and mental categories; for example, the superiority of Western Civilization in relation to other areas of humanity or male superiority over women. I am not speaking about a past fact—finished or overcome. The recent movement of liberation theology identified these causes of poverty and

initiated a solidarity with the poor. The question that emerged was not “How do we help the poor?” but “How do we fight the causes of poverty?”

The French philosopher, Paul-Michel Foucault, remarked some years before Liberation Theology, “We are not really with the poor, if we are not against poverty.” Are we really committed to the poor if we are only critical of the causes of poverty? We must be more than critical; we must fight against the causes of poverty. Today it is not enough to say this person is very generous with the poor, but to ask what is the position of this person against poverty, against the structures of today.

Another factor which has changed our understanding of poverty is the realization of the complexity of poverty. Poverty has one very clear, important, economic aspect, but it is not the only aspect; poverty is more formidable. In liberation theology, we speak about the poor as the insignificant person: insignificant socially, but not insignificant in front of God before Whom no one is insignificant. And a person could be insignificant for several reasons: for economic reasons, or for the color of a person’s skin, or because these persons are not fluent in the dominant language of a country, or because they are women. For these reasons, and many others, persons are judged insignificant. When we speak about the preferential option for the poor, we take into account these complexities of poverty. In the Bible, the poor are not only the economic poor, but persons considered inferior, the Samaritans, for example, in the time of Jesus.

Protesting Cultural Death

Poverty is more than a social fact. In an ultimate analysis, poverty means death—death early and unjust—physical death through sickness and through hunger, but

also cultural death. The anthropologists like to say culture is life. When we despise a culture, we are killing the persons belonging to this culture. Bartolomé de las Casas and the Dominican missionaries in the sixteenth century protested this cultural death of the indigenous people of Central America. The natives were dying before their time, and this happens today—in Africa and in Haiti people are dying from sicknesses already overcome by humanity because they have no money. You only have to remember the continual struggle of the South Africans to receive treatment for HIV-AIDS. People are dying before their time—this is poverty. And from our perspective in liberation theology, we resist addressing poverty only as a social fact, as a social difference, or as economic progress. From this historical movement, we learned how *to do theology* by reflecting on our social contexts and social aims, and I believe we need to recuperate this process of theology.

The other process is more ecclesial. In the middle of the twentieth century, the Second Vatican Council deliberated on the question of poverty. Pope John XXIII encouraged the council to recognize that the Church is “the Church of the poor.” We often repeat the expression, “the Church of the poor,” but the expression has a limited context. We must desire a Church of *everyone*, where no one is excluded, especially the poor—what we call the Christian community. This point, however, was not so present in the formal documents of the council but was more present in the corridors of the council. I cannot justify this omission, but I can understand the reasons for the omission because the most important persons in the council—bishops and theologians—came from rich countries where poverty is treated as an abstract social question. Poverty is a human question, a Christian

question—because poverty is death; it is inhuman; it is anti-evangelical.

Theologians, among them my friends, will say, “I know you are very concerned with poverty because you are Peruvian.” I reply, “No my friend, I am concerned because I am Christian.”

Theologies come from the challenges of historical events; modernity is a historical event that was not immediately recognized by the church. You know the name of a great man, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran theologian and martyr. Bonhoeffer questions our ability to speak of God in the modern world because it seems for many contemporary people that we do not need to speak about God. I labor in Bonhoeffer’s question.

In my parish, I was preaching a more hypothetical, theoretical, and familiar message—God loves you. Whether we are speaking about the gospel or a parable, the final answer always is, “God loves you.” We have no other message, and we change it very little because we want the people to come back next week.

One day while preaching from my theoretical hypothesis, a person from my community said, “You know, you are a great humorist because you speak about the love of God, and you are living in our neighborhood; you know our lives—we have no work; we have no food; and you say, ‘Not only does God love you, but you are the first for God.’”

We must try always to be serious in our preaching, and I have no doubt how God loves all of us—I have no doubt— but this is not the question. The question is: What is my commitment to this affirmation of the love of God? I ask myself how can I say to the poor person, “God loves you.” This is the question in the beginning of the

reflection of what we call liberation theology.

I am absolutely convinced this question is greater than our capacity to answer. I do not pretend liberation theology has the complete answer to the question; liberation theology is a serious attempt to be coherent in preaching God’s love.

Living Into the Lives of Others

Liberation theology began from a need to define theological reflection: the practice of interpreting the Word of God and proclaiming God’s Kingdom in a language not of heavenly origin but of human. Theology is marked by historical moments captured by human language to help Christian communities proclaim the evangelical message. We must use language appropriate to the problems of the moment, and if we neglect the history of our people—the history of humanity—we inhibit our abilities to reflect theologically. As a source of theology, we must live into the daily lives of others.

Although Christ instructs His disciples, in the Gospel of Matthew, to go into the world and make disciples of all nations, we do not have any instructions for going into the world to do theology. I have never found these words in the Bible, and I have read the Bible many times. My intention here is not to say that all theology is irrelevant—that is not the question—theology is very relevant, but we must locate its place exactly. Theology is a human effort, coming from grace, and involves our going forth to communicate this grace—our receiving the gift of the kingdom and our communicating the kingdom—this is theology. Theology is not a religion of physics; theology is a reflection of life. To follow Jesus is a practice; in praxis, you are following Jesus, not only affirming we need to follow Jesus, but following Him. This is a spirituality; this is following Jesus

Christ—theology comes from our following.

One of my teachers, Marie-Dominique Chenu, a French Dominican, wrote a book about this question of theology. He affirms, “If we want to understand a theology, we must go to the spirituality which is behind the theology.” If we want to understand Thomas Aquinas, we must go to Dominic, the founder of the Dominicans. If we want to understand Bonaventure, we must go to Francis. Discovering this approach during my first year of theological studies has led me to understand that the soul of theology is spirituality and that theology is oriented toward the proclamation of the Gospel. We affirm this approach very strongly in Liberation Theology and are criticized for having “a utilitarian view about theology.” We say, “No, theology is useful because the meaning of theology is to help a Christian community announce the Gospel.” Here is the place of theology, located between spirituality and a proclamation of the kingdom. The Kingdom of God is the center of the message of Jesus Christ, and in the kingdom, according to Scripture, the least are first and must be first—the forgotten persons must be recalled.

Two decades ago, a very humble biblical scholar and friend from France, was visiting countries in Latin America—Chile, Bolivia, Peru—and at one moment, he told me, “You know, I understand one point; it is impossible to speak about the kingdom of God without speaking about the poor.”

I replied, “My friend, I admire your humility and your discovery, but you have been dealing with the Bible for more than forty years, and this message was not clear to you before now?”

In theology, there also is a question of liberation, and we take the word liberation for two reasons. The Hebrew and Greek words in Scripture, translated as salvation and redemption, may be translated also as liberation. Liberation was a very important word in civil society in Latin America. Several people were speaking about liberation, movements of liberation, and I think it is the duty of contemporary theology to take the language of civil society and to define the word from a theological perspective. Liberation is salvation. A theology of liberation means a theology of salvation; if poverty is an unjust reality, an anti-evangelical reality in which the ultimate analysis is death, then liberation is the word that is against this reality; to liberate is to give life.

Three Dimensions of Liberation

We then speak of three dimensions of liberation; social liberation from unjust structures, personal liberation from prejudices, and spiritual liberation from sin—because in a theological analysis, the root of injustice is sin. Sin is to break our communion with God and to break our communion with other persons. With sociological methods, you cannot arrive at this understanding of sin; however, a theological analysis certainly leads to such an understanding. We speak about one liberation in three dimensions.

Dimension is a geometric expression. This podium from which I speak has three dimensions, but it is only one podium. When attempting to answer the question of God’s love for the poor, we identify different aspects of liberation. For example, one aspect is acknowledging that the condition of the poor is *not* the will of God. In my parish, I fought for years against the view, expressed mostly by women: “We are born to suffer.” If they are born to suffer, suffering is their destiny. No one is born to suffer, but to be

happy. Blessed are the poor in spirit; *happy* are the poor in spirit. And I must recognize a modest success in my fight because women, the poor women of my parish in Lima where I served for twenty-five years, received this destiny from their mothers. It is not enough to say to the poor person that God has not determined your condition of poverty; poverty is a human construction; *we* have made these conditions.

I would like to recall two main texts from the gospels that are important in liberation theology. In Matthew 25: 31-46, Jesus speaks of the last judgment and says if we give food to the least of our siblings, we give food to Him. This is a very bold affirmation of the gospel writer. In the first testament we have several affirmations close to this, but certainly this text of Matthew is very relevant because Jesus is identified as the least. In the face of the poor, we must discover the face of Jesus Christ. Bartolomé de las Casas discovered the face of Jesus in the faces of the indigenous people, and he saw the face of Jesus in the faces of the African slaves. None of his contemporaries in Spain made this claim. I think Las Casas had evangelical intuition. He was not seeing in the faces of the indigenous people the faces of non-Christians; he saw the faces of the poor according to the Gospel. As a missionary, Las Casas' evangelical intuition was not only to baptize them, but to see them as "the first" just as we should see the poor as "the first" in our colonial society. And another Christian, Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, a sixteenth-century Peruvian, composed a letter of three volumes to the king of Spain in which Guaman Poma described the ill treatment of the Peruvians, his native people, by the Spanish. By also citing Matthew 25, Guaman Poma criticizes the Spaniards when he writes, "You speak

about the gospel, but you do not practice the gospel."

Another text important to our understanding of liberation comes from the Gospel of Luke, the narrative of the Samaritan. We have two questions in the beginning of the parable: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" and "Who is my neighbor?" My neighbor—*my* is the possessive of I, the first person. In other words, who around me is my neighbor? But Jesus also asks a question: "Which of these three [the Levite, the Priest, the Samaritan] proved to be a neighbor to the [wounded] man?" You see the shift? Spontaneously, we think the Samaritan was the neighbor, but this is not the lesson of the parable because strictly speaking we "have" no neighbors. When we approach other persons, we are meeting neighbors; we are converting a person to neighbor, and I become, myself, the neighbor of this person.

Now which of these three is the neighbor? The most important neighbor in the parable is the wounded man because we know nothing about his identity, only that a wounded man has become impoverished. We do not know if he is a Jew; we do not know if he is a Samaritan; we do not know. The other persons have identities; we know about their social functions and responsibilities. The priest and the Levite have responsibilities in the temple; the Samaritan is representative of a people despised by the Jewish people, and the innkeeper had at least one house for receiving people. Even the robbers have an identifiable function, to rob.

The wounded man is really an anonymous person. The question is: How do we approach the wounded man as neighbor and convert ourselves into neighbors? The parable has no further reference on how to gain eternal life or to enter the kingdom, so I believe the greater lesson is that we

are called to approach persons, foremost, because they are in need. When we speak about solidarity with the poor, we are speaking about our relationships with neighbors. The poor are persons, and they are many; the poor are human persons, and among human persons we have very good people and very bad people. We cannot idealize the poor.

The Serious Reasons to Hope

Liberation theology tries to offer a hermeneutic of hope. Theology is one reflection, trying to find in different moments in history, the reasons to hope. When I speak of hope, I am not speaking about easy optimism or illusion, but serious reasons to hope. In the first epistle by Peter, we are reminded that we must be ready to give reasons for our hope. Theology must *be* these reasons.

Despite the oppressive political situation in El Salvador, Óscar Romero insisted, “When I preach, I am always preaching hope—hope.” It is important to discern in historical events what we refuse and what we accept, and it is important to discern the signs of the times. It seems to me, we have today in the global world, a tendency to eliminate hope from the social poor persons and the poor belonging to poor sectors. Today, people are speaking, for example, “We are living in a postmodern world.” Personally, I am not so sure, but maybe it is one manner to be modern, but postmodern, post-industrial, post-capitalist, and postcolonial—people today love to be “post.” The consequences are very clear. To say to the poor that their efforts to become agents of their destiny belongs to the past is against hope. Hope does not exist in a moment; we must create hope. Hope is a gift, a grace, and when we receive a gift, it is not for us; it is for our neighbor. To welcome the grace of hope is to create resources in history. Theology must be nothing more than a

contribution to say to the poor person, “Your conditions could change, perhaps not tomorrow, but it is possible.” We must react against the idea that the poor are destined to live in an endless state of poverty by uniting with them as friends to criticize and to help change their *present* circumstances.

When we speak about the preferential option for the poor, we are speaking about the “real poor”—those who are materially poor; the preferential option is not an option for the poor in spirit. In the Gospel of Matthew, the poor in spirit are the saints, the good disciples; however, the preferential option is not an option for the saints. The option is for the real poor who live ceaselessly in dehumanizing conditions.

We cannot understand the word “preferential” if we do not take into account the universality of the love of God. By employing the word preferential, we are reminded not only to recall God’s love for the poor foremost but to recall God’s love for all humanity. Preference does not exclude anyone; preference is only to say that the poor are first—that the love of God is universal and preferential at the same time. If we say, “We only love the poor,” or “All persons are equal,” we do not understand the Christian message. We must have the courage to confront the tension between universality and preference—a tension, not a contradiction. Tension is dynamic and is the meaning of preferential. The word “option” in Spanish differs from its English counterpart by meaning “to make a decision.” Option is a substantive word whereas the word optional functions objectively, and we have the custom of saying that there always exists a “non-optional option.” Faith is an example of a free option because we live freely as human persons.

The preferential option for the poor may be interpreted as our living and working with the poor, but this interpretation is not complete. The preferential option for the poor has three dimensions: to be committed to the poor in the practice of one's faith and spirituality; to read human history from the perspectives of the poor, or as Walter Benjamin suggests, to read human history against the oppressive grain; and to hear the Gospel as the announcement of the just kingdom.

I have been asked many times in my life, "If you were to write a book on liberation theology today, would your approach be the same as in 1971?" I initially said, "No, no." Then people would ask me, "Do you not agree with your book?" I replied, "No, no. I would have written the book in the same way." People responded, "Good, then your theology has not needed to change."

But today I have a different answer to the question. When a polite journalist recently asked the question, I asked him, "My friend, are you married?" He was very

surprised because he could not understand the relationship between marriage and liberation theology. He answered, "Yes, I am married." And I asked, "How many years have you been married?" He shrugged, "I don't know, twenty years." I asked him, "Are you able to write a love letter to your wife in the same words from the time when you were her fiancé?" He said, "No." "Well, this is my case, my friend."

Such is my situation. For me to do theology is to write a love letter to the God of my faith, the church, and to my people; my theology is a love letter. I cannot phrase the letter in the same way, but the love is the same.