

Salvation and Liberation in Gustavo Gutiérrez: A Reading Guide

What follows is a guide for reading Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation. Perspectives: History, Politics, and Salvation*, rev. edn. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988 (orig. edn., 1971), Chapter 9, "Liberation and Salvation."

The chapter opens with key questions:

What is the relationship between salvation and the process of human liberation throughout history? Or more precisely, what is the meaning of the struggle against an unjust society and the creation of a new humanity in the light of the Word?

(p. 83).

Note the point of departure: not doctrine or texts but praxis and the liberation process.

Actually, GG has given his (well-known) response to these questions in synthetic form earlier in the book. As he says:

In dealing with the notion of liberation in Chapter 2, we distinguished three levels of meaning: political liberation, human liberation throughout history, liberation from sin and admission to communion with God.

(p. 103; *cfr.* summary pp. 24-25 and the whole section, pp. 16-25).

In Chap. 2, GG identifies three progressively deeper meanings of the single, complex liberation process:

First level: institutional, structural liberation.

From the developmentalist schema (of poverty and development) to the liberation scheme (of oppression and dependency). TL, pp. 16-17.

Here the (rational) “mediation” is **social science**.

Second level: Liberation as “humanization” (DB).

The creation of new human beings (TL pp. 17-22, etc.) in a society that is qualitatively more human. New social relations, a cultural revolution. Hegelian and Marxian themes.

The mediations are: philosophy and **utopian imagination** (TL pp. 135-140).

Third level de meaning (theological): liberation from sin and for communion with God and others

Mediation: **the Word of God, theology**.

We can now proceed directly to comment on Chapter 9.

I. SALVATION: CENTRAL THEME OF THE CHRISTIAN MYSTERY

(TL, pp. 83-86)

1. *From the quantitative . . .*

2. . . . *to the qualitative* (TL 83-86).

Here GG *sketches* the traditionalist understanding of salvation and its implications for the mission of the Church: “extrinsicism,” the concern for conversion of non-believers, the under-valuing of earthy life and tasks. He then sketches the way modern theology has overcome these difficulties.

II. HISTORY IS ONE (TL, pp. 86-97)

Preconciliar neo-scholastic theology: a radical distinction between the natural and supernatural orders (and the natural and supernatural destiny of human beings) and between profane history and salvation history. Here Gutiérrez responds:

. . . there are not two histories, one profane and one sacred, “juxtaposed” or “closely linked.” Rather there is only one human destiny, irreversibly assumed by Christ, the Lord of history. His redemptive work embraces all the dimensions of existence and brings them to their fullness. The history of salvation is the very heart of human history. . . . All reflection, any distinctions which one wishes to treat, must be based on this fact: the salvific action of God underlies all human existence. The historical destiny of humanity must be placed definitively in the salvific horizon. (p. 86).

Further on we read:

. . . building the temporal city is not simply a stage of “humanization,” of “pre-evangelization” as was held in theology until a few years ago. Rather it is to become part of the saving process which embraces the whole of humanity and all human history.
(p. 91).

To ground this thesis, Gutiérrez reflects on some central biblical themes.

1. **Creation and salvation** (TL pp. 86-91)

Creation and salvation do not point to two “orders”; they refer to two dimensions of God’s action in history.

- The creation of the universe (in *Genesis*) is the “first salvific act . . . Creation is inserted in the process of salvation.”
- Creation language is used in *Exodus*. The exodus is the creation of God’s people.
- In *Second Isaiah*, the liberation from exile in Babylonia is a new creation.

Creation is bound up with God’s saving action; and viceversa, God’s saving action is creative.

In the *New Testament*, too, creation and salvation intertwine: “The redemptive action of Christ, the foundation of all that exists, is also conceived as a re-creation and presented in the context of creation (cf. Col 1,15-20; 1 Cor 8,6; Heb 1,2; Eph 1,1-22) . . . the work of Christ is presented simultaneously as a liberation from sin and from all its consequences” (TL p. 90).

Gutiérrez builds this argument in critical response to First-World theologies which construe modern **progress** and **development**, and **work** itself, as an extension of the work of the Creator, so that progress, development and work belong to the natural order, not the order of salvation (see TL pp. 100-2).

According to Gutiérrez, these theologies lack an adequate *social* perspective: Modern progress and development are not merely technical matters; nor are they morally neutral. Work and technical progress involve *social relations*; and social relations are frequently perverted by sin. In the relation between work and capital, in particular, social sin must be unmasked. But if sin is social, salvation must also be social.

Gutiérrez further argues that, if human beings continue the work of creation through their labor, as Genesis 1 implies, the liberation from Egypt in Exodus adds the need “for human active participation in the building of society. . . . By working, transforming the world, breaking out of servitude, building a just society and assuming its destiny in history, humankind forges itself.” The creation and exodus stories thus reveal the “*self-creation*” of humanity via labor and social praxis. (TL p. 90; emphasis added).

2. Eschatological Promises (TL pp. 91-97)

To argue that salvation today has material and social content, Gutiérrez must also criticize the idea that salvation is material in the Old Testament and spiritual in the New. This conception leads to interpreting the Old Testament only *allegorically*: For Christians, the exodus is merely a figure of baptism and the paschal mystery of Christ; the “utopian” prophesies of a future society of justice and peace merely pre-figure the Messianic blessings of a purely spiritual salvation. This hermeneutic empties God’s saving work of material and social content. It presupposes a matter-spirit dualism that is foreign to the Bible.

For a more adequate interpretation, Gutiérrez draws on G. Von Rad: “the Bible is the book of the Promise” (p. 91). God’s great Promise of salvation unfolds gradually; it is fulfilled partially throughout history: in the exodus, the promised land, the liberation from captivity, the oracles of the prophets, the new covenant (Jeremiah), the messiah. The later fulfillments of the Promise frequently surpass the earlier ones but do not annul them. God’s great Promise achieves its supreme expression in Jesus Christ. He announces God’s reign (kingdom), which is a new creation, a new community, a new world.

God has acted this way throughout history, and continues to do so today. Today, too, salvation takes place *in* the liberation process, although God’s reign is not fully identified with any concrete liberation.

Human history is in truth nothing but the history of the slow, uncertain, and surprising fulfillment of the Promise.

(pp. 91-92).

III. CHRIST AND INTEGRAL LIBERATION (TL 97-105)

1. *Temporal Progress and the Growth of the Kingdom* (TL 98-100)

We have already studied the issues treated in this section.

2. *The Horizon of Political Liberation* (TL 100-102)

We already commented on this section under “1. Creation and salvation,” above.

3. *Christ the Liberator* (TL 102-105)

Sin is not only personal.

Sin is regarded as a social, historical fact, the absence of fellowship and love in relationships among persons, the breach of friendship with God and with other persons, and, therefore an interior, personal fracture. . . . Sin is evident in oppressive structures. . . . [It is] the root of a situation of injustice and exploitation. . . . Sin demands a radical liberation, which in turn necessarily implies a political liberation. . . . This radical liberation is the gift which Christ offers us. By his death and resurrection he redeems us from sin and all its consequences.

(pp. 102-3).

Gutiérrez finishes the chapter interpreting the contemporary liberation process in these terms, which have become classical:

This is the reason why any effort to build a just society is liberating. And it has an indirect but effective impact on the fundamental alienation [of sin]. It is a salvific work, although it is not all of salvation. . . .

. . . The growth of the Kingdom is a process which occurs historically *in* liberation, insofar as liberation means a greater human fulfillment. Liberation is a precondition for the new society, but this is not all it is. While liberation is implemented in liberating historical events, it also denounces their limitations and ambiguities, proclaims their fulfillment, and impels them effectively towards total communion. This is not an identification. Without liberating historical events, there would be no growth of the Kingdom. But the process of liberation will not have conquered the very roots of human oppression and exploitation without the coming of the Kingdom, which is above all a gift. Moreover, we can say that the historical, political liberating event *is* the growth of the Kingdom and *is* a salvific event; but it is not *the* coming of the Kingdom, not *all* of salvation. It is the historical realization of the Kingdom and, therefore, it also proclaims its fullness. This is where the difference lies. It is a distinction made from a dynamic viewpoint, which has nothing to do with the one which holds for the existence of two juxtaposed “orders,” closely connected or convergent, but deep down external to each other. [= “extrinsicism”

--DB]

. . . Those who reduce the work of salvation are indeed those who limit it to the strictly “religious” sphere and are not aware of the universality of the process. It is those who think that the work of Christ touches the social order in which we live only indirectly or tangentially, and not in its roots and basic structure. . . . It is those who refuse to see that the salvation of Christ is a radical liberation from all misery, all despoliation, all alienation.

(p. 104).

In summary:

The reign of God (salvation) takes place partially in ambiguous (sinful) processes of liberation.

Some questions:

1. Does Gutiérrez sufficiently indicate the distinctions that need to be made within the “one history” in order to account for the transcendence of God and grace?
2. Does Gutiérrez fall into Pelagianism when he speaks of the self-generation of humanity, for example in his commentary on the exodus story?. Does he give sufficient emphasis to the need to accept the reign of God as a gift? To the contemplative dimensión of life? Does he juxtapose human praxis and divine gratuity, without really integrating the two?
3. What philosophy of history underlies Gutiérrez’s discourse concerning the “historical becoming of humanity” and the “ self-generation” of humanity?
4. To what extent does his theology here reflect a modern (hegelian-marxian) optimism and activism?
5. Does salvation also occur in when liberation appears to fail (think of the cross) or for severely handicapped persons and those who care for them?
6. What modifications do you think need to be made, and that Gutiérrez would make, in light of today’s changed political context?