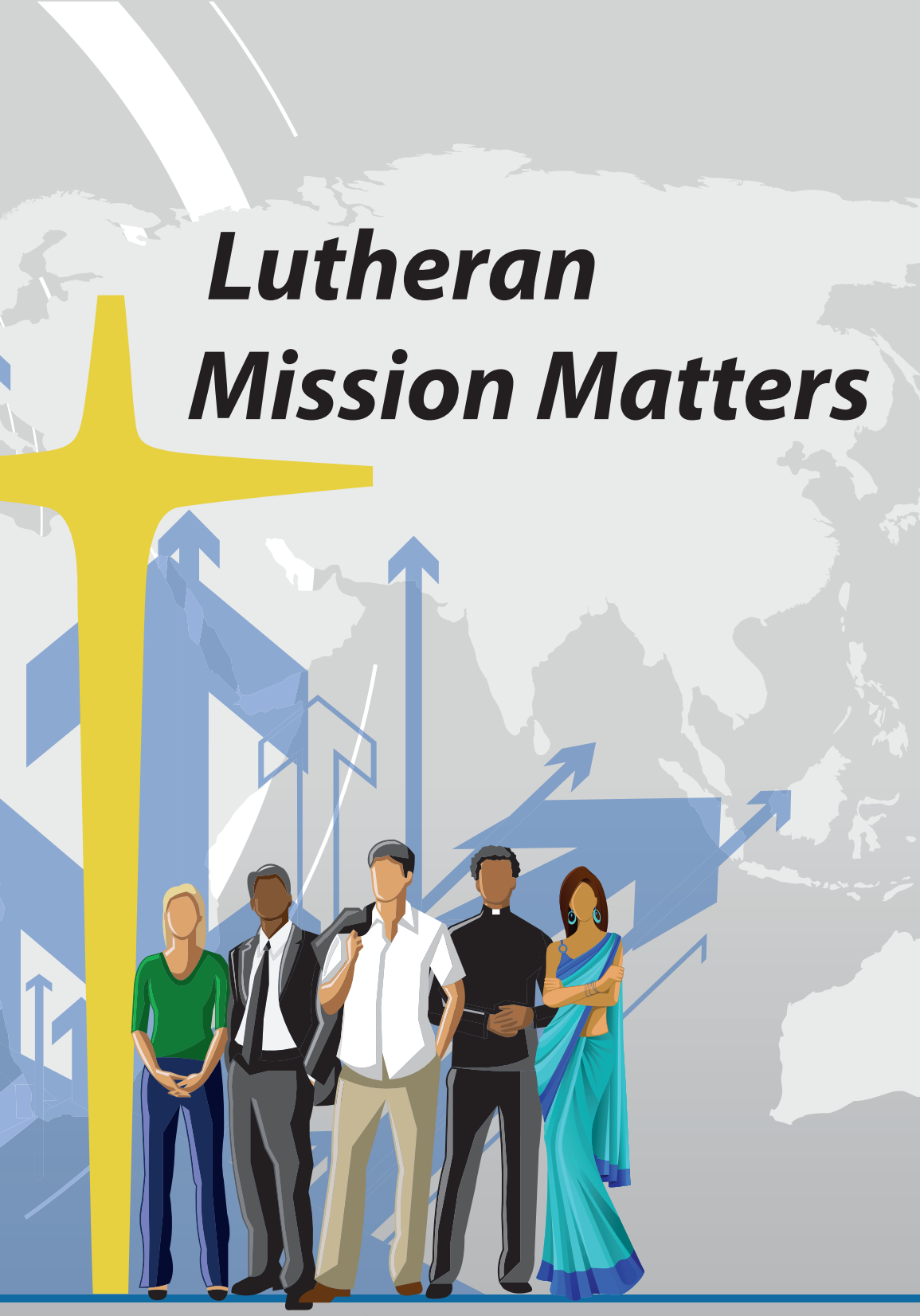
Lutheran Mission Matters



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Where Gutiérrez Got It Right: Reflecting on Liberation Theologies in Light of the World Immigrant Crisis

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Abstract: This paper was originally presented at the North Central Region of the Evangelical Missiological Society at Trinity Seminary, Deerfield, Illinois, on March 16, 2019. 1968 marked the fiftieth anniversary of Gustavo Gutierrez's original paper, *Una Teología De Liberación*, *Perspectivas*, first delivered in Chimbote, Peru, and published as a book in Spanish in 1971. 2018 signaled the forty-fifth anniversary of the English translation and publication of Orbis Publication's *A Theology of Liberation*. This document will invite the reader to give a new consideration of Gutierrez's message in light of today's political, economic, and spiritual realities, shorn of the East-West, Communist-Capitalist ideologies and rhetoric of the 1970s and 80s that often clouded a clear understanding of Gutierrez's original intent.

Rev. Dr. Douglas Groll was born and raised in Northwest Ohio, where as early as 1949 he began a life of interaction with Hispanics. Upon graduating from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in 1966, he served as missionary in rural congregations in Monagas State, Venezuela, ultimately moving to Caracas to administer Concordia School and the Venezuelan mission. The Grolls returned to the United States in 1978 to Trinity Lutheran Church in Cleveland, where he served the historic Anglo congregation as well as an emerging Pto. Rican Lutheran community. In 1987 he was called to organize the Hispanic Institute of Theology and implement the Synod's first theological education program by extension which established learning centers in over twenty cities in the US and Canada. Although initially dependent on the television studios of Concordia University, River Forest, as technology changed it was possible to reorganize the Institute on the home campus of Concordia Seminary in 2006 as the Center for Hispanic Studies. Pastor Groll has contributed to theological journals and has authored La Adoración Bíblica, *a textbook for Hispanic liturgists.* douglasgroll@sbcglobal.net

Introduction

To be quite frank, giving much thought to Gutiérrez a year ago was not a part of my daily thinking. Specific events of the summer and fall of 2018 prompted me to re-read Gutierrez and reflect on the continuing relevance of his perspectives. The first questioning came after reading a summer version of *Engage*, an attractive, informative update about the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's mission endeavors around the world. Committed men and women were seen actively engaged in different forms of wholistic ministry. One article on street evangelism was coupled with sincere projects to show God's mercy to children in underdeveloped nations that desperately need all the help they can get. The names of the men and women in mission had changed, the objects of their efforts might have been slightly better dressed, the pictures in the magazine were in full color and beautifully formatted. However, I could not escape the conclusion that the real nature of the systems that perpetuated these realities had not changed. A color-enhanced *Lutheran Witness* of fifty years ago would have looked substantially the same. It struck me that although we might be using more modern communication techniques to better tell a narrative, our narrative of a first world–third world, we–they, patron-dependent model of a colonial approach to mission was still operative.

A second moment that struck me as a timely commentary on our collective misunderstanding of historical realities was manifest in a major network's interview of Ohio's ex-Governor John Kasich in July as he reflected on the humanitarian crisis brought about by the federal government's implementation of family separation at our southern border. In that interview he basically said that what we were observing was not really a problem of our borders but of the humanitarian crisis evident in Central and South America. The potential catastrophe for both Latin American peoples and North American society was further heightened by the fall "Caravan" of asylum seekers marching toward the US southern border and the reactive militarization of the southern border by the US government that signaled the possibility of far-reaching social and political upheaval in both the Latin American and North American contexts.

The third event that perhaps highlights even more failed national foreign policies and Christian mission strategies of dozens of Roman Catholic and Protestant mission endeavors is the abject breakdown of civilized order and all social systems in Venezuela. Thousands of Venezuelans are fleeing their homeland to Columbia, Brazil, Chile, and Peru each day. As one of dozens of long-term missionaries who spent careers in evangelistic, education, and health ministries in that country, I have had to ask the questions, "What did we do wrong? What were we not seeing? Were there ideas out there a half century ago that theologically addressed the sinful systems that have brought about this complete breakdown of the one country of all of Latin America that should not be experiencing this tragedy?"

A fourth event was only a 20- or 30-second sound clip of a reporter interviewing a young Central American mother desperately trying to get her daughter across the border. Her words, "It is God's will that I save my child!" posited haunting questions: Where does God fit in all of this reality? How is God on one side of the border or the other or on both?

Through [Gutiérrez's] writings, he has invited me to stretch my grasp of the nature of sin and salvation beyond the dogmatic and perhaps docetic nature of at least a good part of my Lutheran experience and, I suspect, other North American Protestant thinking. He will engage you and hopefully help you shape an even better proclamation of the Gospel so that even the poor can hear and experience Good News in this world as well as the world to come

I believe that Gutiérrez can be helpful in addressing some of the underlying challenges the Church faces in our day. The import of this presentation is to invite you to read critically this creative Christian thinker, now in his nineties, and dare to let him challenge you. As in my own case, you probably will not have a thorough grasp of the vastness of Roman Catholic statements, encyclicals, and conference publications and consequently will not understand or feel the doctrinal or cultural impact of all that he says. Nevertheless, through his writings, he has invited me to stretch my grasp of the nature of sin and salvation beyond the dogmatic and perhaps docetic nature of at least a good part of my Lutheran experience and, I suspect, other North American Protestant thinking. He will engage you and hopefully help you shape an even better proclamation of the Gospel so that even the poor can hear and experience Good News in this world as well as the world to come.

I am sure you can understand that I can't summarize a fifty-year movement in twenty-five minutes. What I propose to do in this time is (1) establish the context of Gutiérrez's original thought, (2) try to set forth what I consider the main theological contributions of Gutiérrez's thought, and (3) convey Gutiérrez's critique of his own thinking and evolution of his thought based on the introduction to the second edition of *A Theology of Liberation*; on his commentary on Job (*On Job: God Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*); on amplification of his thoughts on the poor as actors in theological methodology as reflected in *We Drink from Our Own Wells*; and, in a sense, on a defense of liberation theology in both *The Truth Shall Make You Free: Confrontations*; and finally on recent comments made in a 2015 compilation of essays, *On the Side of the Poor*, in collaboration with Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Müller.

Understanding the Contexts of Gutiérrez's Work

Late Twentieth-Century South American Theological Awakenings

Fifty years ago most international news and events were filtered through Cold War ideologies. Events that would happen even in Latin America would be processed through the East-West rivalry. Throughout Latin America, the transition from rural self-sustaining economies to First World–Third World dependency models left millions poorer than before. World War II had shown Latin America that the prosperous industrialized nations needed raw materials from the Third World. Latin Americans saw themselves as a part of this dynamic in the negative sense of exporting much with little positive return. There was unrest and anger. The United States had engineered the overthrow of the leftist Arbenz government of Guatemala in 1954. The Nixon motorcade was stoned as it entered Caracas in 1958. Fidel Castro came to power in January 1959. In March 1961, the Bay of Pigs invasion, planned under the Eisenhower administration and approved by John F. Kennedy, ended in disaster. In October 1962, the world seemed to edge toward conflagration during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The effects of these localized outbreaks of criticism and confrontation with North American hegemony took different turns. In an attempted national answer to long-term neglect and fear of a second Cuban Revolution, the Kennedy administration launched the Alliance for Progress programs to develop the underdeveloped nations of Latin America. Millions of dollars in aid moved into the Americas to attempt to economically and militarily pacify the South and stop potential revolutions. The area was flooded with hundreds of expatriate workers, advisors, and Peace Corps and US military advisory contingents. At the same time that secular programs of development were rushing into the Americas, Christian churches from the United States and Europe bought into theologies of development. As a young missionary in Eastern Venezuela in 1966, I was a part of that mind-set. We were active in extensive Word and Sacrament ministry in traditional evangelism and educational ministries. At the same time, however, we opened a bakery, a barber shop, an agriculture coop with extensive irrigation technologies, and a taxi line. A heady optimism empowered our activism.

There were reactions to theologies and philosophies of development from within and without ecclesial communities throughout Latin America. Indigenous voices, often priests who worked with the poor in barrios far removed from the official hierarchies of the Roman Church in Latin countries, began talking about theologies of revolution. Within a few years of the declaration of the Alliance for Progress, it became obvious that it was not working. After a decade, the region was still rife with right wing dictators. One would hear voices saying, "Development is not enough!" "The whole system has to go!" Theological voice to one theology of revolution was embodied in the life and death of the Columbian priest, Camilo Torres. Born of a

wealthy Columbian family, this priest–sociologist spearheaded development movements to educate Columbian peasants through innovative radio instruction in Columbia throughout the early 1960s. As hard as he worked, he ultimately concluded that this "development" was not working. He joined the guerilla forces and was killed by government soldiers in 1965.

His strategic death had far-reaching implications for Christian Latin identity. As I traveled to my congregations and mission stations in Eastern Venezuela from 1967 to 1970, I would see painted images of Camilo Torres on the walls of remote rural villages alongside those of Che Guevara. Revolution and theologies of revolution merged in the memories of Camilo. Evangelical churches were not immune from the thinking about the need for something beyond development. Young evangelical pastors were speaking about "*concientización*-consciousness raising" and meaningful agrarian reform. Images of Che and Camilo could be seen at youth "evangelism" rallies.

I not only saw pictures of Father Torres as I traveled around Eastern Venezuela, I also saw evidence that armed revolution or any form of a repetition of the Cuban experience would not be allowed throughout the Americas. Venezuelan army movable checkpoints were set up to impede the movement of Venezuelan leftist guerillas that controlled parts of the mountains of Monagas state. US Army insignias on ammunition belts and water canisters were plainly visible.

By the late 1960s, Christian thinkers within the church throughout Latin America had concluded that neither "development" nor "revolution" was a theological answer to empower a change in the totality of the problems of their nations. Ten years of development had not changed power structures or the plight of the poor. Armed revolutionaries had ultimately been outgunned. Theologies of development and revolution had not been articulated in a way with which the faithful or their leaders could identify. In 1968, Gutierrez wrote his seminal essay, then expanded and published it in Spanish in 1971 as *Una Teología De Liberación.* This initiative invited an alternative theological answer to Christian witness in Latin America and the world.

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An Initial Reflection on *Una Teología De Liberación*

Gutiérrez's original *Teología* of 1971 was significant for both Roman Catholic and Protestant Western Hemisphere Christians insofar as he (1) articulated a different methodology for doing theology unfamiliar to either Roman or Protestant faithful or their theologians; (2) explained the reality of the presence of a "political theology" present in the entire history of the Christian Church, even as it has ebbed and flowed from assumptions of "Christendom" to complete denials through spirited attempts to separate church and state and privatize the Christian's role in the realm of civic responsibility; and (3) postulated definitions of the Biblical "poor" broad enough to encompass physical, emotional, and spiritual poverty imposed on the poor to the extent that his focus on the "preferential option for the poor" remains a driving mantra in Roman Catholic understanding of bringing the Gospel to the world as both historical and eschatological liberation-salvation.

Before attempting to summarize or evaluate these major themes in Gutiérrez's writings, it is important to note that he writes from the context of largely mid-twentieth-century Roman Catholic theology but with an intense pastoral focus on ministry to the poor in Latin America. One might say that his first edition of *Teología* is speaking out of and to the Roman Catholic Church and its ministry. His documentation is a treasure of the Roman Church's studies, conferences, Papal histories and encyclicals. His writings dialogue with those of German Roman Catholic precursors to liberation, Johannes Metz and Karl Rahner. He shows broad familiarity and deep understanding of German Protestant theologians Bonhoeffer, Moltmann, Bultmann, and Von Rad. This must be stressed and understood by Christians coming out of a North American Protestant or Evangelical background.

Though, in the initial work, he references broader ecumenical relationships post-Vatican II and in the preface to the 1986 edition reflects on liberation theologies in reference to the North American Civil Rights Movement and liberation theologies of Africa and Asia of the late seventies, he basically wants to speak to the thought world of Roman theology and its essentially European history. With the exception of Harvey Cox, there is no mention of other North American Protestant luminaries such as Richard or Reinhold Niebuhr or Billy Graham. Put another way, he is not in a polemical relationship with North American Protestant tradition or its ministry in Latin America. It simply is not on his radar. He speaks to his church, but, in a sense, he speaks

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1. A Different Understanding of Doing Theology

Central to Gutiérrez's thoughts are three related questions: What does it mean to be a Christian? What does it mean to be Church in the unknown circumstances of the future? How will the poor hear the Gospel? The first question has to do with the Church that we know, with those who call ourselves Christian. It challenges us to ask about how we live out our faith over against our neighbor. The second and third are in a sense more situational. Throughout his work, he comes back again and again to the pastoral question coming out of his Peruvian pastoral situation as to how the Gospel can become meaningful on the most nominally Christian of all continents. yet with the most suffocating situations of abject poverty.

Orthopraxy and/or Orthodoxy

The Church is challenged to rethink its way of thinking and living out its message of salvation. Here, as a churchman, Gutiérrez acknowledges the historic Roman understanding of orthodoxy, that state where God's revelatory Word interacts in the life, liturgy, and traditions of the Church to bring a teachable message of God's love in Jesus Christ. Out of this orthodoxy, this "right teaching," the Church then has historically extrapolated all doctrines and practical applications of the Gospel. Seen from this perspective, there is a type of immutable treasure of truths or doctrines that is exercised in a rather spiritual plane that then becomes operative in the life of the person. Practice follows thought or formulated truth in this model.

Gutiérrez prefers to move away from this model to *orthopraxis*, a situation in which the Holy Spirit, the Word, the history, and the historical moment all interact to determine God's will in that moment in that place. In this model, theological articulation and orthodoxy follow the living Spirit-filled dynamic of the moment. In practical application, this means that the Spirit-filled impoverished Honduran refugee who tells an American reporter, "It is God's will that I save my child," as she tries to get asylum in the US becomes the theologian. It is out of this dynamic that one hears of the creation of the "base communities," where people come together as people to hear what God's Word is saying to their lives in their contexts at a moment in time and empowers them to realize that they, too, are recipients of God's love to be cherished persons. In this respect, it is noteworthy that Gutiérrez references the literacy work of Pablo Freire in Brazil as the innovator of what became known as "*concientizacion*" through literacy.

> "To do the truth," as the Gospel says, thus acquires a precise and concrete meaning in terms of the importance of action in Christian life. Faith in a

> God who loves us and calls us to the gift of full communion with God and fellowship with others not only is not foreign to the transformation of the world; it leads necessarily to the building up of that fellowship and communion in history. Moreover, only by doing this truth will our faith be "verified," in the etymological sense of the word. From this notion has recently been derived the term orthopraxis, which still disturbs the sensitivities of some. The intention, however, is not to deny the meaning of orthodoxy, understood as a proclamation of and reflection on statements considered to be true. Rather, the goal is to balance and even to reject the primacy and almost exclusiveness which doctrine has enjoyed in Christian life and above all to modify the emphasis, often obsessive, upon the attainment of an orthodoxy which is often nothing more than fidelity to an obsolete tradition or a debatable interpretation.[1]

2. Reality of the Presence of a "Political Theology"

A second theme that Gutiérrez wrestles with throughout *Teología* is a focus on the reality of a political theology that has consciously or unconsciously been present throughout both Old and New Testament history. Before arriving at a formal treatment of this theme some three-quarters through the work, the author carefully sets the stage by inviting a consideration of aspects of the history of the people of God that could lead one to conclude that political theologies in one form or another always have and always must be a part of human presence in God's world.

In the previous section of this presentation, we spoke about orthopraxy as a necessary methodology in the Church's ministry in this world. Behind this argument is Gutiérrez's argument against a persistent dualism that he contends has plagued Christian witness and ministry. It has seemingly always been easier to think than to act. Any analysis of New Testament writings—the constant battles with Docetism and the constant threat of Greek Platonic philosophies that would separate body and soul to the point of ignoring flesh and blood presence of humanity in general and the Biblical witness of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth in the first century—certainly point to an acceptance in some form or other of the need for theological reflection on the Christian's relation to the powers that govern.

From Constantine on for many centuries, the church in one form or another could operate out of a Christendom model where one could contemplate a church-centered society that to some degree operated out of an established order. With the Enlightenment, we see human reason and its constructs as the center with the church moving to the periphery. There is a privatization of the faith. Gutiérrez saw how that had developed in Europe and how the Roman Church reacted to that reality by its speaking of "The Distinction of Planes"—the insistence of the definition of the

priesthood and the hierarchy as the "spiritual" side of the church, i.e., one plane, and the various lay movements and even political lay movements as the church's second plane, a way of becoming incarnate in shaping a just society. Christian Social Democratic parties so prevalent in mid-twentieth-century Latin American countries would be a manifestation of this attempt. My own Lutheran tradition's way of speaking of "left hand" and "right hand" kingdoms or our North American founding fathers' focus on separation of church and state—with insistence of the individual person of faith influencing the political power over against a structured Christian answer to the church in society—are outcomes of this development over many centuries.

According to Gutiérrez, as societies have become increasingly society-centered, moving around rational organization and discourse, these constructs of division of planes seem to break down. Any North American Christian living in March 2019 simply cannot escape the theological implications of everything going on around us and especially the theological implications of political decisions. Gutiérrez states it this way:

> Nothing lies outside the political sphere understood in this way. Everything has a political color. It is always in the political fabric—and never outside of it—that a person emerges as a free and responsible being, as a person in relationship with other persons, as someone who takes on a historical task. Personal relationships themselves acquire an ever-increasing political dimension. Persons enter into relationships among themselves through political means.[2]
>
> In Christian circles there was and continues to be—difficulty in perceiving the originality and specificity of the political sphere. Stress was placed on private life and on the cultivation of private values; things political were relegated to a lower plane, to the elusive and undemanding area of a misunderstood "common good." At most, this viewpoint provided a basis for "social pastoral planning," grounded on the "social emotion" which every self-respecting Christian ought to experience. Hence there developed the complacency with a very general and "humanizing" vision of reality, to the detriment of a scientific and structural knowledge of socio-economic mechanisms and historical dynamics. Hence also there came the insistence on the personal and conciliatory aspects of the Gospel message rather than on its political and conflictual dimensions. We must take a new look at Christian life; we must see how these emphases in the past have conditioned and challenged the historical presence of the Church.[3]

If we listen only to these strong, succinctly articulated statements, we can readily see how and why within the Roman Church and certainly within our Protestant and Evangelical communities Gutiérrez would be cast only in a leftist

political dimension, devoid of an explicit Christian message. The reality, however, is quite the opposite. Simply because he is so insistent in reducing prevalent spirit-body dualities he invites his readers into the Word. His understanding of Jehovah's relationship with Israel interfaces with that of Von Rad's *Heilsgeschichte* (salvation history)—the God of a sinful people who are led and fed body and soul as a people in the Exodus. The history of Israel from beginning to end, from David through the Exile and Return, is a political history of interaction between God and flesh and blood beings. Jesus the Christ is born of Mary the Virgin, who had to be in Bethlehem because there was a political census. The Child King fled to Egypt because there was a political price on His head. Our Lord Himself could speak of Herod as "that fox." Ultimately, Jesus of Nazareth could be tried and executed, perhaps viewed as a Zealot in a very political setting.

> The Sanhedrin had religious reasons for condemning a man who claimed to be the Son of God, but it also had political reasons: the teachings of Jesus and his influence over the people challenged the privilege and power of the Jewish leaders. These political considerations were related to another which affected the Roman authority itself: the claim to be Messiah and King of the Jews. His trial closely combined these different reasons. Crespy can therefore state: "If we attempt to conclude our investigation we see clearly that the trial of Jesus was a political trial and that he was condemned for being a Zealot, although the accusation was not solidly established."94 From the moment he started preaching, Jesus' fate was sealed: "I have spoken openly to all the world" (John 18:20), he tells the High Priest. For this reason John's Gospel presents the story of Jesus as a case "brought, or intended to be brought, against Jesus by the world, represented by the Jews. This action reached its public, judicial decision before Pontius Pilate, the representative of the Roman state and holder of political power."[4]

How this presence of a "political reality" in the very center of the New Testament itself and how it plays out in the Church then becomes the challenge today, even as it was in 1968 or 1971. Gutiérrez dialogues with Oscar Cullman in how one reacts to this "political reality." Gutiérrez respectfully disagrees with Cullman as they embody responsible Christian understanding of the tension between individual conversion and structural Christian response:

> For Cullmann—one of the authors who has studied this problem most seriously and carefully—the key to the behavior of Jesus in political matters is what he calls "eschatological radicalism," which is based on the hope of an impending advent of the Kingdom. Hence it follows that "for Jesus, all the realities of this world were necessarily relativized and that his allegiance, therefore, had to lie beyond the alternatives of 'existing order' or 'revolution.'" Jesus was not uninterested in action in this world, but because

> he was waiting for an imminent end of history, he "was concerned only with the conversion of the individual and was not interested in a reform of the social structures. . . ."[5]
>
> Moreover, Cullmann uses this belief of Jesus to support his insistence on personal conversion as opposed, in a certain sense, to the need for the transformation of structures; the latter would appear only when the waiting draws long. But, in fact, when he preached personal conversion, Jesus pointed to a fundamental, permanent attitude which was primarily opposed not to a concern for social structures, but to purely formal worship, devoid of religious authenticity and human content. In this, Jesus was only turning to the great prophetic line which required "mercy and not sacrifice," "contrite hearts and not holocausts." For the prophets this demand was inseparable from the denunciation of social injustice and from the vigorous assertion that God is known only by doing justice. To neglect this aspect is to separate the call to personal conversion from its social, vital, and concrete context. To attribute the concern for social structures—except with the qualifications operative today to the prolongation of the waiting period impoverishes and definitely distorts this dimension.[6]

The position reflected in this essay is that Gutiérrez is not indifferent to personal conversion or to the certainty of an eternal home past this life, but rather that the proclamation of Good News in the here and now of humanity in history, in the person and work of Jesus Christ, is the launch point into a trajectory that involves both an individual and communal (political) future that in a sense is a seamless continuum into eternity.

Gutiérrez has not been deaf to a certain "pushback" from within the Roman Church to a seeming indifference to an individual faith relationship which might seem to be dominant in a political theology. The reader is invited to read responses to this critique and others in the publication of his doctoral dissertation and defense of his theology at the Catholic Institute of Lyon in 1985 in *The Truth Shall Make You Free: Confrontations.*

3. Poverty Defined and the Preferential Option for the Poor

The underlying question that has prompted Gutiérrez's critique of theological methodologies and the development of a political theology has ultimately been this basic concern for the poor of Latin America. In his *Teología*, all themes lead to this and ultimately to his articulation of the Roman Church's embrace of what has become known as "preferential option for the poor." To get to that, however, one must get closer to workable definitions of poverty so as to properly apply meaningful Good News to sad situations.

Perhaps the easiest aspect of defining poverty goes to the most obvious physical realities of the lack of food, housing, and physical support. In addressing this theme, Gutiérrez is careful to avoid any implication that there is something remotely good, salutary, or inherently noble in suffering material or physical poverty. "In the Bible poverty is a scandalous condition inimical to human dignity and therefore contrary to the will of God."[7] To build on this concept, it is important to understand that throughout this work the author does not see poverty as only a negative loss or lack of physical sustenance, but that poverty is no accident. The poor are poor because others make them that way. Gutiérrez's use of the Old Testament prophets posits the willful intent of people to take advantage of others and profit from them:

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> Poverty is not caused by fate; it is caused by the actions of those whom the prophet condemns.[8]
>
> "These are the words of the Lord: For crime after crime of Israel I will grant them no reprieve because they sell the innocent for silver and the destitute for a pair of shoes. They grind the heads of the poor into the earth and thrust the humble out of their way. . ." (Amos 2:6–7).[9]
>
> There are poor because some are victims of others. "Shame on you," it says in Isaiah, "you who make unjust laws and publish burdensome decrees, depriving the poor of justice, robbing the weakest of my people of their rights, despoiling the widow and plundering the orphan" (Isaiah 10:1–2).[10]

Simply put, there is no good Biblical rationale for individual actions or systemic structures that destroy physical, spiritual, or emotional wellbeing.

Running parallel to this prophetic denunciation of poverty throughout both the Old and New Testaments is a second and nobler definition of poverty that must be recognized, cherished, and not confused with the first. This is a vision of the "poor" who willingly cast total dependence on God.

> There is a second line of thinking concerning poverty in the Bible. The poor person is the "client" of Yahweh; poverty is "the ability to welcome God, an openness to God, a willingness to be used by God, a humility before

> God." From the time of Zephaniah (seventh century B.C.), those who awaited the liberating work of the Messiah were "poor": "But I will leave in you a people afflicted and poor, the survivors in Israel shall find refuge in the name of the Lord" (Zeph. 3:1213). In this way the term acquired a spiritual meaning. From then on poverty was presented as an ideal: "Seek the Lord, all in the land who live humbly by his laws, seek righteousness, seek a humble heart" (Zeph. 2:3). Understood in this way poverty is opposed to pride, to an attitude of self-sufficiency; on the other hand, it is synonymous with faith, with abandonment and trust.[11]

Rather than use this ultimate spiritual definition of poverty as an excuse for neglecting or encouraging a material poverty, Gutiérrez calls the Christian to surrender to the spiritual poverty so as to be capable of loving service to the other poverty.

> We turn now to a third meaning of the term: poverty as a commitment of solidarity and protest. The taking on of the servile and sinful human condition, as foretold in Second Isaiah, is presented by Paul as an act of voluntary impoverishment: "For you know how generous our Lord Jesus Christ has been: He was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). This is the humiliation of Christ, his kenosis (Phil. 2:6–11). But he does not take on the human sinful condition and its consequences to idealize it. It is rather because of love for and solidarity with others who suffer in it. It is to redeem them from their sin and to enrich them with his poverty. It is to struggle against human selfishness and everything that divides persons and allows that there be rich and poor, possessors and dispossessed, oppressors and oppressed.[12]

Working out of this synthesis of material and spiritual poverty to this commitment of solidarity, Gutiérrez can then articulate the Biblical **preferential option for the poor.** This was no easy task simply because, in the Cold War context of the 1970s, it was immediately assumed to be a Christianized cosmetic makeover or dressing up of Marxist theories of class struggle. Especially in the 1986 revision of the original work, the author admits to rewriting this section precisely to clarify so many misconceptions. Through it all, however, there are three affirmations that help to give a Christian perspective

1. In a divided and sinful world one must acknowledge the existence of economic and social divisions in the society. There is a struggle between groups and classes of people any time one group dominates or oppresses the other. This reality will inevitably bring confrontation and sometimes conflict, and the Christian's entry into this dynamic is painful simply because Christians know that division and separation of humanity is not God's will. "The class struggle is a fact that Christians

cannot dodge and in the face of which the demands of the gospel must be clearly stated."[13]

2. Because conflicts arise between groups in which often times one group composed of people is more powerful than the other and uses people for its ends, there must be concern for people. Real people and often real Christians will be in conflict. "What we have, then, is an opposition of persons and not a conflict between abstract concepts or impersonal forces. This is what makes the whole matter so thorny and challenging to a Christian conscience."[14]

3. The Church's words and actions in a preferential option for the poor does not mean a lack of concern or love for all people.

> The gospel proclaims God's love for every human being and calls us to love as God loves. Yet recognition of the fact of class struggle means taking a position, opposing certain groups of persons, rejecting certain activities, and facing hostilities. For if we are convinced that peace indeed supposes the establishment of justice, we cannot remain passive or indifferent when the most basic human rights are at risk. That kind of behavior would not be ethical or Christian. Conversely, our active participation on the side of justice and in defense of the weakest members of society does not mean we are encouraging conflict; it means rather that we are trying to eliminate its deepest root, which is the absence of love.[15]
>
> The universality of Christian love is, I repeat, incompatible with the exclusion of any persons, but it is not incompatible with a preferential option for the poorest and most oppressed. When I speak of taking into account social conflict, including the existence of the class struggle, I am not denying that God's love embraces all without exception. Nor is anyone excluded from our love, for the gospel requires that we love even our enemies; a situation that causes us to regard others as our adversaries does not excuse us from loving them.[16]

Gutiérrez's devotional commentary, *On Job: God Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, eloquently draws the reader into God's love for those whose suffering seems as incomprehensible as Job's and yet their dynamic possibility of faith.

Gutiérrez's Reflections Based on Subsequent Publications

The original intent of this presentation and article was and continues to be that of an invitation to the reader/attendee to listen to Gutiérrez after these fifty years from her or his current context, especially keeping in mind three realities: (1) Geopolitical ideologies of a half century ago, i.e., Marxism versus capitalism, as a pretext for rejection of liberation theologies seem to be non-applicable today given the economic globalization that has capitalist enterprises in China, Russia, and the

prior Iron Curtain countries on the par with Western capitalism, even though in recent weeks there seems to be an increasing political rhetoric on both sides of a capitalism-socialistic debate. (2) Responsible economic analysis of reputable study groups such as OXFAM continues to show that the gap between rich and poor is widening. (3) The question of how the poor will hear the Gospel continues to challenge Christians and their ecclesial communities to a constant critical reflection of their theological methodologies and practical incarnations of the Gospel. Father Gutiérrez's own trajectory over this past half century has been that of an ongoing conversation with his academic studies, the broad exposure to the wider church, the historical moment, and his walk in Word and worship.

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Central to understanding the author's reflections on his own thought is a return to his first major theme of the need to see the pursuit of theology as an ongoing exercise that will continue to bring together Spirit, Word, people, and historical moment. Consequently, in his various writings referenced in this presentation, one senses a constant "upgrading" of thought. Without entering into great detail, one can see where he has adjusted and expanded his thinking. These include but are not exhaustive of the changes:

1. The development of theologies of liberation and subsequent people movements in Asia, Africa, and North America.
2. His recognition that he had not called sufficient attention to racism in earlier writings.
3. Although exploitation of women is mentioned in his first edition he heightens attention to this theme already in the 1986 edition and sees it as a major challenge in his later essays.
4. Although contact and collaboration with other Christians is not a part of his original *Teología*, it is seen as a necessity in later documents.
5. His essays of 2015 especially call for a continual evaluation of how ecology impacts all economies and the suicidal implications of current international threats to global stability.
6. He reflects that advances in science could make it possible to analyze problems and bring about more suitable outcomes for advancing the poor.
7. Postmodern philosophies with their inherent tendency toward individualism and a privatization of truth can relativize and threaten any universal truths and bring about the subsequent loss of jointly shared care and service to and with the poor.

8. What has not changed in Gutiérrez thought and focus is his insistence on and satisfaction in the Roman Church's "preferential option for the poor" over this past half century. While he has recognized how this has often been misunderstood, this one succinct statement seemingly summarizes how, properly understood, it can so enrich the ministries of all Christians:

> *.the poor merit preferential attention, whatever may be the moral or personal situation in which they find themselves. In other words, the poor deserve preference not because they are morally or religiously better than others, but because God is God, in whose eyes "the last are first."* The entire Bible is stamped by God's loving predilection for the weak and mistreated of human history.[17] (emphasis added)

In his initial writings, subsequent contributions, and reflective essays, as he has spoken of the Church's call to the "preferential option," he has heightened the need for churches to ultimately be poor and walk in martyrdom with the poor.

Postscript

Two events of the month since the original presentation of this document have prompted me to suggest a brief postscript. The first has to do with intense political debate about the southern border of the United States and the recognition by almost everyone that the presence of one hundred thousand or more immigrants from Central America seeking asylum is in one form or another a humanitarian crisis.

The second event is the announcement made in the second week of April of the electronic imaging of a black hole M87 some 53 million light years into space. These two realities prompt interrelated questions: Is the God who created and sustains M87 in its almost incomprehensible greatness the same God of the Guatemalan child sheltered by a plastic tent under a bridge near El Paso? Has this question in any way been addressed by our current traditional theological systems in such a way that the Guatemalan child or the Christian scientist/astronomer can both find a loving God and hear and experience Good News in their contexts? Has the past half century of theologies of liberation given us yet just another failed trend or cosmetic soundtrack of optimistic answers that have ultimately failed, or are they worthwhile initiatives in legitimate thought and action? A renewed reading of Gutiérrez can invite the reader into new dialogues and action in the three major areas suggested by this presentation.

The Dialogue between Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy

Meaningful theological development has seldom been a quick or hurried answer to complex realities. Even a cursory review of the creedal development of the Church's historic symbols leads us to a difficult and often contentious struggle over at least three centuries. They were developed in their contexts and left the church of

subsequent centuries a basic *orthodoxy* to be cherished as fundamental. Yet they were not without the *praxis* of their moment. This was also true of our Lutheran framers of Augsburg who scrupulously articulated their faith statements as German political leaders to be taught in their specific parishes. All of this is simply to say that a call for the mutual dialogue between methodologies of orthodoxy and orthopraxy can only serve the Church. An orthodoxy based on somewhat static scientific world views prior to modern science's looking at the grandeur of the universe and simultaneous genetic studies of our DNA and chromosome variations in the minutiae of our bodies cannot survive without the Spirit-driven worshiping community reflecting and articulating the Word-driven meaning of life as it relates to the *practice* of daily living in each age.

Political *Theologies* in Unstable Political Realities

In every age the church has needed to struggle to articulate how it relates as individuals and corporately to the powers and policies of the state. Ours is no different and is especially necessary in our context of unpredictable governments ruling by the weight of public opinion driven by social media in the midst of a seeming privatization of the faith experience in North American Christianity. Gutiérrez's insistence that there is a political side to all theological experience and at the same time the need for theological reflection about political directions is a necessary counter to our tendency to keep political discourse out of our faith expressions. In this regard, his articulation of a methodology of *orthopraxy* stemming from the Christian witness of Spirit-driven Christians applying the Word to their contexts in an environment of Christian love can be an antidote to so much of our refusal to seriously dialogue with one another within our Christian communities, let alone in a broader context. Serious, honest discussions of the Word in the political world could be a welcome alternative to the statement by a pastor of a prominent Evangelical congregation at the recent Evangelical Missiological Society in Illinois: "Just the mention of a conversation about the immigration crisis is like throwing a hand grenade into the middle of my congregation!"

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A Preferential Option for the Poor in the Midst of the Globalization of Poverty

Poverty in its many forms is a direct or indirect result of sinful humanity's warfare against God and our fellow humankind. Gutiérrez is blunt at times in refusing to accept a premise that the poor are poor because they choose to live in such a way that invites such poverty. He openly states that in many cases the poor are that way because the more powerful declared war against them. The powerful oppress. Oppressor and Oppressed dance a dance of spiritual and physical death. In contrast to this negative denunciation of our sinful condition, theologies of liberation bring a worthwhile insistence on the possibility of a meaningful ministry by God's people as they identify with the poor along with the Christ of the Beatitudes, while at the same time employing the blessings of the possibility of using the sciences and systems to study our world and the universes beyond, as well as all of creation, in such a way that even the smallest child in a caravan under a bridge has the security to live out his days healthy, happy, and productive until his Lord returns.

Endnotes

[1] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: 15th Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1986), 8.
[2] *A Theology of Liberation*, 30.
[3] *A Theology of Liberation*, 31.
[4] *A Theology of Liberation*, 133.
[5] *A Theology of Liberation*, 134.
[6] *A Theology of Liberation*, 134.
[7] *A Theology of Liberation*, 134.
[8] *A Theology of Liberation*, 166.
[9] *A Theology of Liberation*, 166.
[10] *A Theology of Liberation*, 167.
[11] *A Theology of Liberation*, 169.
[12] *A Theology of Liberation*, 172.
[13] *A Theology of Liberation*, 157.
[14] *A Theology of Liberation*, 158.
[15] *A Theology of Liberation*, 159.
[16] *A Theology of Liberation*, 160.
[17] Gustavo Gutierrez and Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Muller, *On the Side of the Poor: The Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2015), Location 1799, Kindle.

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