

## LIBERATION FOR COMMUNION IN THE SOTERIOLOGY OF GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ

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*[Editor's Note: The author argues, contrary to some critics, that Gutiérrez's communal understanding of soteriology is central to his theology. Salvation is not merely liberation, it is communion with God and one another in history and beyond. In transformative communities with the poor and marginalized, we are set free for love and communion. Gutiérrez's emphasis on the communal dimensions of salvation is a major contribution.]*

GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ has noted clearly the soteriological nature of his theology: "The theology of liberation is a theology of salvation in the concrete, historical and political conditions of our day."<sup>1</sup> In fact, a decidedly soteriological focus has shaped his theology from its very beginnings. In a talk to Latin American theologians meeting at Petrópolis in 1964 (a talk that set the early agenda of what was to become liberation theology), Gutiérrez raised the central question of how to establish a saving dialogue with people in Latin America.<sup>2</sup> Later, in *A Theology of Liberation*, he noted that one of the great deficiencies of contemporary theology was "the absence of a profound and lucid reflection on the theme of salvation" and he called for renewed foundational investigation of the notion of salvation.<sup>3</sup> Yet the fact that soteriology is central to Gutiérrez's entire theological project has not been sufficiently appreciated. Nor have critics demonstrated any clear understanding of the profoundly communal character of his soteriology.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1983) 63.

<sup>2</sup> Roberto Oliveros, "Liberación y teología: Génesis y crecimiento de una reflexión (1966–1976)," in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, trans. and ed. Alfred T. Hennelly (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990) 45.

<sup>3</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, rev. ed., trans. and ed. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988) 83.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, Stanley Hauerwas based his critique of the centrality of the metaphor of liberation in liberation theology, as articulated by Gutiérrez in particular, on the argument that "liberation only makes sense as a means to a more profound sense of fellowship" ("Some Theological Reflections on Gutiérrez's Use of 'Liberation' as a Theological Concept," *Modern Theology* 3, no. 1 [October 1986] 70). Hauerwas seemed oblivious of the fact that this is Gutiérrez's very point.

Although it is widely acknowledged that Gutiérrez has offered a major reinterpretation of the doctrine of salvation, studies of his reinterpretation usually focus on his conceptualization of salvation as an integrated process of liberation.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, critics have commonly claimed that he simply equates salvation and liberation.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Gutiérrez does not reduce salvation to historical liberation. He interprets salvation ultimately as communion with God and one another in history and beyond it. My purpose here is to fill some lacunae in scholarly literature on Latin American liberation theology in the hope that I can also demonstrate the continued relevance of liberation theology in a world of massively structured social injustice, where an ethos of individualism contributes to the increasing political, economic, and social exclusion of the majority both within nations and around the globe.

#### SOTERIOLOGICAL REFLECTION FROM THE MIDST OF A PEOPLE

Community—community concretized originally in the particular historical moment of Latin America from the late 1960s through the early 1980s—is the basis of Gutiérrez's soteriology. In *A Theology of Liberation*, he made the soteriological point that human beings are called to meet God insofar as they constitute a community. As he put it, "it is a question not so much of a vocation to salvation as a convocation."<sup>7</sup> This conclusion expressed a profound conviction that we are saved within a liberative community engaged in transformative historical praxis among the marginalized. It reflected Gutiérrez's experience of both the reality of Latin American oppression and the collective effort against oppression mounted by members of popular liberation movements<sup>8</sup> and base ecclesial communities.<sup>9</sup> "In our starting point, then, we find the deaths of our people, but also the will to live," observed Gutiérrez

<sup>5</sup> Miguel Manzanera, *Teología, Salvación y Liberación en la obra de Gustavo Gutiérrez. Exposición analítica, situación teórico-práctica y valoración crítica* (Bilbao Universidad de Deusto, 1978), James B. Nickoloff, "The Church and Human Liberation" (Ph D diss., Graduate Theological Union, 1989) chap 5

<sup>6</sup> Roger Haight made no attempt to distinguish Gutiérrez's position from that of other liberation theologians when he stated that "salvation in this world, in history, is liberation, and its ultimate goal is final liberation and freedom" (*An Alternative Vision: An Interpretation of Liberation Theology* [New York: Paulist, 1985] 39). In his dissertation on the concept of salvation in Gutiérrez's theology, Peter Wright Kendrick concluded that Gutiérrez "identifies" salvation with liberation ("Christian Freedom and Liberation: A Biblical and Theological Critique of the Concept of Salvation in the Theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez" [Ph D diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1990] 309).

<sup>7</sup> Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* 45

<sup>8</sup> For a comprehensive review of the rise of Peruvian popular movements and a knowledgeable appraisal of their gains, see Nickoloff, "The Church and Human Liberation" 88–116

<sup>9</sup> For Gutiérrez's most sustained soteriological reflection on the experience of base Christian communities engaged in liberation for communion, see *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984)

in his 1978 keynote address to the Catholic Theological Society of [North] America.<sup>10</sup>

Immersed in the historical liberation process under way among poor communities in Latin America, Gutiérrez has fashioned a soteriology that honors their efforts as salvific. It was in the context of their communal struggles for liberation that, in the "second act" of theological reflection, he developed an understanding of salvation as communion with one another and with God begun in history. In this context, also, he articulated his central soteriological principles which are fundamentally communal in nature. He reasoned that a communal praxis of liberation is necessary in the face of structural injustice and the collective dimension of oppression; poor communities are agents of transformation as they affirm life in the midst of death; liberating social praxis requires solidarity understood as transformative action with and for the poor, and individuals are invited to move beyond isolating individualism and join in solidarity in the building of a new society; and finally there is an integral link between the gratuitous love for the poor on God's part and ours, and solidarity in the search for the social justice that restores communion.

In Gutiérrez's vision, liberative communities among the poor and marginalized are *loci* of salvation, places of transformative action where communion is experienced historically in anticipation of full communion in the eschaton. These communities, committed to historical transformation of their particular situations of oppression, hear the revelation concerning a saving God who desires communion of all in God; they begin to experience integral liberation; they recognize themselves as addressees and recipients of salvation. At the same time, through their communal praxis, solidarity, and gratuitous love, they help make salvation a reality in history as they engage in liberation for communion; they see themselves also as agents and witnesses of salvation. Liberative communities among the believing poor are sacraments of salvation in that they effect what they signify, namely communion with God and one another.

#### SALVATION AS COMMUNION

Selective reading can be misleading since Gutiérrez sometimes speaks of salvation as liberation, at other times as life, and yet again as communion. In *A Theology of Liberation* he writes that "the Bible presents liberation—salvation—in Christ as the total gift,"<sup>11</sup> and, a little later, that "liberation, understood as an integral whole . . . is at the heart of the Lord's saving work."<sup>12</sup> In this same book, however, he offers the following description of salvation: "It is God's gift of defini-

<sup>10</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, "The Voice of the Poor in the Church," *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings* 33 (1978) 30–34, at 33.

<sup>11</sup> Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* 83.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* xl.

tive life to God's children."<sup>13</sup> In *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, Gutiérrez maintained that "the deeper meaning of what we call 'integral liberation' . . . is, in the final analysis, the acceptance of the kingdom of life."<sup>14</sup> At the same time, he equates salvation and communion. For example, he has argued: "Salvation—the communion of human beings with God and among themselves—is something which embraces all human reality."<sup>15</sup> What, then, is the ultimate meaning of salvation for Gutiérrez? A passage from *We Drink from Our Own Wells* offers a succinct statement which encompasses the three themes of liberation, life, and communion; at the same time, it leaves little doubt about the goal of salvation: "In the final analysis, to set free is to give life—communion with God and with others—or, to use the language of Puebla, liberation for communion and participation."<sup>16</sup>

Gutiérrez's soteriological vision of communion rests on a foundational distinction between freedom from and freedom for. This classical distinction is one of the basic elements in the traditional Christian view of salvation, a distinction commonly affirmed by Latin American liberation theologians. For instance, Leonardo Boff divides the process of liberation into liberation from an overall system of oppression, and liberation for the self-realization of the people.<sup>17</sup> In adopting the classical distinction, Gutiérrez consistently highlights liberation as freedom from all that oppresses and freedom for communion.

The context is God's love. According to an intuition of Augustine of Hippo, this love is the fullness of human freedom, and authentic freedom is life lived in God's love. Thomas Aquinas, inspired by Pauline texts such as Galatians 5:1 and 13, distinguished between freedom from and freedom for. Gutiérrez summarized his insight in this way: "The first refers to freedom from sin, selfishness, injustice, need, and situations calling for deliverance. The second refers to the purpose of the first freedom—namely, love and communion; this is the final phase of liberation."<sup>18</sup> In other words, Christ came to set us free and to give us life in its fullness (John 10:10), but the ultimate purpose of this liberation and life is communion in love. These different dimensions are simultaneously present, partially in this life and fully in the eschaton.

In the end, Gutiérrez conceives of salvation as liberation for communion, as a statement in *The Truth Shall Make You Free* makes clear: "Liberation . . . is a journey toward communion. Communion, however,

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. xxxix.

<sup>14</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free: Confrontations*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990) 12.

<sup>15</sup> Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* 85.

<sup>16</sup> Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells* 92.

<sup>17</sup> Leonardo Boff, "Salvation in Jesus Christ and the Process of Liberation," trans. J. P. Donnelly, in *The Mystical and Political Dimension of the Christian Faith, Concilium* 96, ed. Claude Geffré and Gustavo Gutiérrez (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1974) 78.

<sup>18</sup> Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free* 67.

is a gift of Christ who sets us free in order that we may be free, free to love; it is in this communion that full freedom resides."<sup>19</sup> Gutiérrez repeats this central insight throughout his writings and talks.<sup>20</sup> He emphasized its importance once again by giving the title "Free to Love" to Part 3 of *We Drink from Our Own Wells*. In light of his broad soteriological vision he critiqued *Libertatis conscientia*, the Vatican II instruction on liberation theology, because of its failure to fully develop the idea of communion as the ultimate purpose of liberation.<sup>21</sup>

#### THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

As Gutiérrez theologizes from the "underside of history" and explores foundational theological categories from within the soteriological framework of liberation for communion, he articulates a renewed understanding of the nature of God as gratuitous love, the identity and mission of Christ as liberator and reconciler, spirituality as a communal journey of contemplation in liberative praxis, and the Church of the poor as sacrament of communion. Since the project of salvation is located between gratuitousness and justice, what is central to all these categories is the concept of communion as both gift and task. The communal struggle for integral liberation leads to encounter with God and one another; speech about God learned in encounter serves to deepen commitment to the struggle.

#### *A God of Gratuitous Love in Solidarity with the Poor*

Pivotal to Gutiérrez's ongoing soteriological reflection is the concept of God as gratuitous love. From his point of view, commitment to the poor, in acts of solidarity freely chosen out of love, witnesses to a loving God who gratuitously seeks restored communion through justice for all, especially for the marginalized. Commitment to the poor concomitantly finds its point of reference within the vast and mysterious horizon of God's gratuitous love, a love we are called to imitate however imperfectly.

Gutiérrez's most thorough treatment of the theme of God's gratuitous love is found in *On Job* where it is intimately tied to that of God's saving love in the midst of pain and anguish. From his encounter with God, the suffering Job gained a graced insight that "the entire work of creation bears the trademark of gratuitousness,"<sup>22</sup> and that "God is entirely independent of space and time. God acts only in accordance

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 106.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, *A Theology of Liberation* 24; "Faith as Freedom: Solidarity with the Alienated and Confidence in the Future," *Horizons* 2 (Spring 1975) 26; *We Drink from Our Own Wells* 92; and "Christian Hope for the New Millennium," *Catholic New Times* (Toronto), 15 December 1996, p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free* 139.

<sup>22</sup> Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987) 67.

with the utterly free divine will: God does what God pleases to do."<sup>23</sup> However, God's revelation to Job did not end here. Amid a personal experience of poverty and suffering, Job identified with the misery of others and came to a hard-won but ultimately graced understanding that God's salvific plan has its origin in a gratuitous and creative love that intends redemption.<sup>24</sup> The gratuitous nature of God's love accounts for God's preferential love for the poor and God's desire to see justice done them. God loves them and calls them to communion simply because they are poor. Gratuitous, preferential love sends both God and us on a quest for the justice that restores communion. Gutiérrez's vision of salvation as communion with God and one another leads him to highlight the all-important connection between God's gratuitous gift and God's love as a basis for the justice that ensures communion.

*Christ the Liberator: Irruption into History of God's Gratuitous Love*

Unlike some other liberation theologians, Gutiérrez has not devoted an entire volume to Christology. While essential to his soteriology, his christological perspective is discovered rather from a study of his treatment of Christ in various parts of his writings. It soon becomes apparent that he conceives the soteriological role of Jesus to be that of liberator and personification in history of God's gratuitous love. Furthermore, not only is Jesus an irruption into history of God's gratuitous love, he is an irruption "that smells of the stable."<sup>25</sup>

From Gutiérrez's soteriological standpoint, it is vital to establish that Jesus Christ, as irruption into history of the God of gratuitous love, is "precisely *God become poor*,"<sup>26</sup> for it enables him to make the link between the person of Jesus and his saving work. The God of gratuitous love seeks in Jesus to restore communion with creation and establish a community of brothers and sisters. God chooses solidarity with the poor as the necessary salvific praxis. Gutiérrez relies on Luke 4:16–20 as a paradigmatic text in his interpretation of the reign's project as liberation for communion. In *The God of Life*, he noted the integral connection between liberation and communion highlighted by the reference to "a year acceptable to the Lord," i.e. a jubilee year:

The good news the Messiah proclaims to the poor is focused on liberation. This perspective is further underscored by the phrase "a year acceptable to the Lord" . . . . By doing away with all unjust inequality, the year of the Lord's favor was meant to contribute to the permanent establishment of a fellowship among the members of the Jewish people and, in the final analysis, of communion with God.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 89.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 69.

<sup>25</sup> Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990) 85.

<sup>26</sup> Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor* 13.

<sup>27</sup> Gutiérrez, *The God of Life* 9.

As Gutiérrez understands it, Jesus' goal was integral liberation in the concrete socio-economic and political conditions of a given historical period. In Christ the liberator, the liberation process necessary for communion is fully completed. For his saving work encompasses all dimensions of liberation, including liberation from sin—a breach of friendship with God and others that lies at the root of socio-economic and political injustice and of alienating situations that repress human freedom and development. In liberating us from sin, Christ ensures that our liberation is total and establishes a basis for community and communion.<sup>28</sup>

*Spirituality: A Collective Walking in the Spirit*

Gutiérrez's approach to spirituality is ecclesiological and touches deeply the root experiences of Latin American Christian communities engaged in liberative praxis among the poor. In reaction to what liberation theologians consider too narrow an understanding of spirituality, one that emphasized the transcendent over the imminent and the spiritual over the material or corporeal, he speaks of "walking in the Spirit," with all the connotations of connection to concrete daily reality implied by this expression. "The initial encounter with the Lord is the starting point of a following, or discipleship. The journeying that ensues is what St. Paul calls 'walking according to the Spirit' (Romans 8:4). It is also what we today speak of as a spirituality."<sup>29</sup>

However, this walking is not primarily an individual undertaking. Gutiérrez is quite explicit in his dismissal of an individualistic spirituality on the grounds that it "has no means of steering those who have embarked on a collective adventure of liberation towards the following of Christ."<sup>30</sup> It is rather a question of a collective walking in the Spirit: "The following of Jesus is not, purely or primarily, an individual matter but a collective adventure. The journey of the people of God is set in motion by a direct encounter with the Lord but an encounter in community: 'We have found the Messiah.'<sup>31</sup> The Exodus events of liberation and covenant are preeminently community events. To recognize that the following of Jesus is undertaken along a communal route rather than along some private path is to recover the biblical understanding of the journey of a people in search of God, that is, of spirituality.

<sup>28</sup> Gutiérrez offers his most succinct summary of his christological approach in *A Theology of Liberation* 102–5.

<sup>29</sup> Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells* 54.

<sup>30</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Drink From Your Own Well," trans. Paul Burns, in *Learning To Pray, Concilium* 159, ed. Casiano Floristan and Christian Duquoc (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1982) 39.

<sup>31</sup> Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells* 42; see also *The Truth Shall Make You Free* 6.

*Church of the Poor: Sacrament of Communion*

From Gutiérrez's ecclesiological perspective, the Church fulfills its role as a sign in history of the universal communion that it is called to effect in the measure that it is a Church of the poor. It is a sacrament of salvation to the extent that it is the visible sign of the presence of God within the liberation process and to the extent it witnesses to God's unifying design by giving pride of place in concrete ways to the poor and all those alienated by dominant systems. In his view, "in a divided world the role of the ecclesial community is to struggle against the radical causes of social division. If it does so, it will be an authentic and effective sign of unity under the universal love of God."<sup>32</sup> In Latin America, it is mainly base Christian communities that play this vital salvific role.

The involvement of Christians in the world of the poor has soteriological significance in that it results in the creation of communities of solidarity which are bearers of God's salvation in history. Base ecclesial communities live what Gutiérrez terms an "ecclesial experience of filiation and fellowship"<sup>33</sup> as they actualize his central soteriological principles. In its deepest sense, the Church of the poor is a "sacrament of communion," a formula that best describes Gutiérrez's theology of Church and one that in a powerful symbol draws together the different threads of his soteriology of communion.

## CONCLUSION

Gutiérrez does not simply equate salvation and liberation. Rather he interprets salvation ultimately as communion with God and one another in history and beyond it. Within each of the three dimensions that he distinguishes in the unified process of integral liberation, liberation is sought for the sake of community and the final goal of communion is partially achieved. We are set free from oppressive situations for love and communion. The ultimate purpose of liberation is communion in love. The journey of a people to liberation leads to encounter with God and a new creation (community) is simultaneously fashioned. Eschatological salvation, namely final communion with God and others, is anticipated historically in covenantal communities such as base Christian communities engaged in integral liberation.

The primary subject of salvation, in Gutiérrez's view, is the community rather than the individual. What matters is "convocation" to salvation. He acknowledges the personal dimension of salvation but, for him, the individual is always part of a particular historical community; salvation has concrete social and political implications for that community. Furthermore, communities of the poor and those committed to a preferential option for them, are the main subjects of salvation at this

<sup>32</sup> Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* 161.

<sup>33</sup> Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor* 38.

historical juncture. Newly conscientized, they call into question the socio-economic and political order that oppresses and marginalizes them. They create alternatives and adopt cohesive strategies of liberation leading to communion. Guided by their faith, base Christian communities form a church that is a sacrament of salvation.

Examination of the theological foundations of Gutiérrez's soteriological vision dispels any doubt concerning its grounding in the Latin American reality of oppression, in the biblical tradition, and in the life of the Church. It is fundamentally a soteriological reflection from the midst of a people both poor and believing. From his long, intimate experience among them, Gutiérrez has reinforced the vital role of Christian communities in God's historical project of the restoration of communion, and he has laid a solid theological foundation for the recovery of a salvific significance for theology in society and history, something particularly necessary today.

Gustavo Gutiérrez has made a major contribution to contemporary soteriological reflection in his emphasis on communities of the poor as *loci* of salvation. Exploration of the communal dimensions of salvation from this particular perspective continues to be a vital theological task. Intrinsic to the neoconservative, neoliberal orthodoxy that is dominant in society today is an ideology of individualism that ignores the social context of evil and denies sin as a communal reality. Gutiérrez's soteriology of communion from the underside of history provides the communal framework for reflection and transformative action on behalf of the poor and the marginalized that are needed in order effectively to challenge currently accepted views and promote inclusive community.

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