At the end of our last lecture, we began to discuss liberation theology. I want to continue with that in this lecture and take a look at the political and social thrust of the movement and then turn to see the theological bases for that political and social thrust, but before we get to that, let’s begin with a word of prayer.

Our loving heavenly Father, how we thank you so much for Jesus Christ. He has told us that if we know the truth, the truth will make us free. And He has told us that He is the truth. Lord, we realize then that some of the major themes of liberation theology are indeed consistent with biblical teaching and biblical understanding, and yet, Lord, as we’re going to see, those biblical themes have been applied in ways that Scripture does not itself apply them. Help us to see appropriate applications of the liberating truth of the gospel, but let us also, Lord, see ways in which this can lead us into error. Help us then, Lord, as we study in this lecture. For it’s in Christ’s name we pray it. Amen.

In our last lecture we began to look at liberation theology. This is a movement, as I mentioned to you, that is present on many continents, in many Third-World countries, but also we find it even in various forms in our own country, the United States, in terms of various forms of black theology and feminist theology. This is a movement in theology that has been gaining ground, gaining popularity within the latter portion of the twentieth century, and I anticipate that as we move into the next century, it will still have many adherents.

We noted as we began our discussion of liberation theology that liberation theologians talk about different concepts of theology and of doing theology. And we noted that the one that Gustavo Gutierrez in his *Theology of Liberation* recommends to us is the approach that sees doing theology as critical reflection on praxis or action. We then began at the end of our last lecture to talk about the specific political and social message of this theology, and we
began our discussion with a distinction between development as opposed to liberation, and we just had enough time to talk about the concept of development. We noted that there are various ways that this concept can be understood. It can be understood purely in an economic way. It could be understood, on the other hand, as a total social process that includes economic, social, political, and cultural aspects, but then we also noted that it could be understood in a humanistic perspective. We ended with that concept, and we noted that from that humanistic perspective that really leads to the concept of liberation. Let me, if I may then, elaborate what Gutierrez has to say about this concept of liberation, especially in contrast to the idea of development.

Gutierrez notes that the concept of developmentalism, if we can put it that way, has been under severe attack because it has been deficient in leading the poor countries out of their undeveloped situation. If you go back to about the middle of this [the twentieth] century and shortly thereafter, there was a lot of talk about newly developing nations and let’s help them to develop socially and economically and that will change all sorts of things for them. As time moved on, we saw that that wasn’t, in fact, going to be the solution that people thought it was. Part of the problem with this developmental approach is that it has tried to make reforms within existing governmental, social, and economic structures, whereas it has become evident that that plan is not going to work and what really needs to happen is that those structures need to be overthrown altogether and new structures put in their place.

So rather than focusing on developmentalism, the concept of liberation has arisen, but this liberation is conceived of as having three interdependent levels, and let me sketch each one of them for you. The first level of liberation expresses the aspirations of oppressed people and social classes emphasizing the conflictual aspects of the economic, social, and political process which puts them at odds with wealthy nations and oppressive classes. It’s this aspect of liberation that is the social, political, economic aspect. Namely, it notes that people have been oppressed socially, politically, and economically, and as a result of that, they need to be liberated, they need to be put in a position where they are no longer confronting the wealthy nations, the oppressive classes.

But there’s a second level of liberation. Liberation can also be applied, the concept that is, to an understanding of history. We are told that man is seen as assuming conscious responsibility for his own destiny. Here the theologians are speaking of the liberation
of the human psyche in such a way that a new man is being created and with that new man, a qualitatively different society. This level of liberation is the psychological or humanistic aspect of liberation. So the first level was the social, political, economic aspect of liberation; now this second level is the psychological or humanistic aspect of liberation.

But there is a third aspect of liberation, a third level of it. We are told that liberation leads to the biblical sources which inspire the presence and action of men and women in history. In Scripture, Christ Himself is presented as the one who brings us liberation. Christ, the Savior, liberates from sin, which, of course, is the ultimate root of all disruption of friendship and of all injustice and oppression of one group of people by another. Christ truly makes men and women free; that is, He enables them to live in communion with Him, and this is the basis for all human brotherhood. So this third level of liberation, then, is the theological aspect or level of the concept of liberation, and you’ll remember that Gutierrez had said that these three levels of liberation are all interdependent. You cannot simply talk about the theological aspects of liberation and forget the psychological or humanistic and the social, economic, and political elements, and likewise you can’t isolate any of the others out from the rest.

On page 37 Gutierrez tells us that he thinks these three different levels of meaning are very much interdependent, that what you do in one is going to have implications for the other levels of liberation. Here’s what he says as he summarizes his thinking on this matter. He says, “This is not a matter of three parallel or chronologically successive processes, however, there are three levels of meaning of a single complex process which finds it deepest sense and its full realization in the saving work of Christ. These levels of meaning, therefore, are interdependent. A comprehensive view of the matter presupposes that all three aspects can be considered together. In this way, two pitfalls will be avoided. First, an idealist or spiritualist approaches which are nothing but ways of evading a harsh and demanding reality, and second shallow analyses and programs of short-term effect initiated under the pretext of meeting immediate needs.” You see, with the first error what would happen is that you think if you just could change people’s theological orientation and their spiritual relationship with God, that would take care of all the problems that they have socially, economically, and politically. Gutierrez says no.
The other side of it would simply to say, “Let’s look at their poverty. Let’s look at their oppressive economic and social and political circumstances, and let’s give some quick fix economically or socially or politically. Let’s not worry about psychological and spiritual and theological liberation.” Gutierrez is saying that won’t do either. That is not going to have any long-term effect of truly liberating people.

Well, all right, if that is the concept of liberation as opposed to developmentalism, then how does this concept of liberation, especially the political idea of liberation, relate to the theological task? Gutierrez tells us this. He says, and I quote him on page 45, he says, “To speak about a theology of liberation is to seek an answer to the following question. What relation is there between salvation and the historical process of the liberation of man?” In other words, we must attempt to discern the interrelationship among the different meanings of the term “liberation” which we indicated above. The issue then is to turn theological thought to reflection upon social praxis, social action, in such a way that it does not exclude but rather encompasses political action. It’s not either you do something spiritual in society or you do something social, political, and economic. Rather we need to do something spiritual and theological that incorporates the political.

On pages 48 and 49 of *A Theology of Liberation*, we read the following from Gutierrez. He says,

In the past, concern for social praxis in theological thought did not sufficiently take into account the political dimension. 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 dimension. We must take a new look at Christian life.
must see how these emphases in the past have conditioned and challenged the historical presence of the church. This presence has an inescapable political dimension. It has always been so, but because of new circumstances, it is more urgent that we come to terms with it. Indeed there is a greater awareness of it, even among Christians. It is impossible to think of or live in the Church without taking into account this political dimension.

What we have discussed above leads us to understand why for Christians social praxis is becoming less and less merely a duty imposed by their moral conscience, or a reaction to an attack on Church interest. The characteristics of totality, radicalness, and conflict, which we have attributed to the political sphere preclude any compartmentalized approach and lead us to see its deepest human dimensions. Social praxis is gradually becoming more of the arena itself in which the Christian works out along with others, both his destiny as man and his life of faith in the Lord of history. Participation in the process of liberation is an obligatory and privileged locus for Christian life and reflection. In this participation will be heard nuances of the Word of God which are imperceptible in other existential situations and without which there can be no authentic and fruitful faithfulness to the Lord.

If we look more deeply into the question of the value of salvation which emerges from our understanding of history—that is, a liberating praxis—we see that at issue is a question concerning the very meaning of Christianity. To be a Christian is to accept and to live—in solidarity, in faith, hope, and charity—the meaning that the Word of the Lord and our encounter with Him give to the historical becoming of mankind on the way toward total communion. To regard the unique and absolute relationship with God as the horizon of every human action is to place oneself, from the outset, in a wider and more profound context.

So no longer can we as the church retreat behind our buildings and stay away from society; we have to be involved in social action. In part 3 of Gutierrez’s book, he then goes on to explain the options that are before the Latin American Catholic Church, and he shows how even though the Roman Catholic Church in the past has
been one of the oppressing institutions, those members of that church—laity, priests, and even bishops—have been reflecting on their own role in the oppression of men and women and have been seeking to take an active role in the revolutionary liberation movement.

What specifically has the church in Latin America been doing to try to correct its oppressive stance from the past? Gutierrez outlines for us five different things that he finds the Roman Catholic Church in his day doing. First of all, the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America has engaged itself in the denunciation of injustice. As a matter of fact, there are those within the Roman Catholic Church who have even denounced the injustice of the church itself when it has wielded its power over the people.

A second thing that the church has been involved in in Latin America is what he calls conscientizing evangelization. What does this involve? It involves educating the Christian conscience and inspiring, stimulating, and helping orient all the initiatives that contribute to the formation of men and women. In other words, it involves helping people become aware of their possibilities of liberating themselves and encouraging them to do so. So you can tell the gospel here is not a gospel of saving grace in Jesus Christ from personal sin that blocks one’s relationship with Christ; rather, the gospel is the Good News, if you will, of the need to liberate one’s self from social, political, economic structures that are oppressive and to gain total freedom of the individual both socially, politically, economically, psychologically, and theologically.

There’s another role that the Roman Catholic Church has taken in Latin America, and it has to do with the matter of poverty. Here Gutierrez says that the attitude of the church needs to be an attitude where it becomes the church of the poor. Instead of talking about the church of the poor, it must be the church of the poor. How does the church become the church of the poor? Suggested ways of implementing such poverty within the church are the evangelization of the poor. In addition, denouncing various forms of injustice. Beyond that, members of the church can adopt a simple lifestyle, they can adopt a spirit of serving others rather than expecting others to serve them, they can, as well, adopt a lifestyle that gives them freedom from temporal ties, intrigue, or ambiguous prestige. So here what Gutierrez is saying is that the church really needs to identify with the poor by becoming poor in the sense that they no longer are driven by concerns for economic
gain or prestigious positions. They’re satisfied to live a simple lifestyle and to serve other people.

There’s another way that the church can relate itself to this matter of liberation, and these are ways, of course, that Gutierrez says it has been doing so in Latin America, “namely the church can change the structures of the church itself, structures that are clearly inadequate for the present-day world.” Gutierrez says that “the Roman Catholic Church’s ecclesial structures make it impossible to act in a manner that accords with the gospel.” And here he’s thinking of the hierarchical set-up in the Roman Catholic Church. The way that there is special privilege and position and it is so hard to break into that hierarchy. Wherever one is in the Roman Catholic system it seems that one is sort of stuck with it, and that suggests that there needs to be a change in the very structures within the Roman Catholic Church.

And then finally another role that the church can take in Latin America and has taken is to change its lifestyle and its ministry with respect to the clergy; that is, the clergy themselves can take upon themselves a different lifestyle and a different method of ministry. This involves changing the way they earn a living. For example, we are told that they should be encouraged to get a secular job instead of living on stipends or making a living from teaching religion, they should go out and earn their daily bread in the ways that the people they minister to do so as well. Changes are also encouraged in the direction of letting laity participate more in the pastoral decisions of the church. All of these things would be things that the church in general and the clergy in particular could do to stop the oppressive circumstances that one finds within the Roman Catholic Church, and by stopping that one could aid more generally in the process of liberating people in totality.

That then is what Gutierrez has to say about the relationship of liberation to the theological task. I want to turn now to see what he offers for us as the theological bases for this movement. We’ve been told that theology is to be done as critical reflection upon praxis. He has explained to us what he thinks the social and political approach should be, but now we want to see what the theological bases for this call to social action and change are.

Here I want to note for you a series of concepts. The first one is the concept of sin, and then following upon that will be the concept of salvation that Gutierrez presents. Then we will talk about his
concept of the revelation of God in history, and then finally his understanding of the relationship of eschatology to politics. First of all then, the concept of sin. As you read through Gutierrez’s work, and I think you’d find this in many liberation theologies, you see that sin is not considered as an individual, private, or merely interior internal reality; rather sin is regarded as a social historical fact. It is seen as the absence of brotherhood and love in relationships among men. It is seen, if you will, as the breach of friendships with God and with other people. So the focus here is on the collective dimension of sin rather than the personal, private individual aspect of sin. We are told, then, that sin is the ultimate cause of poverty, of injustice, and of the oppression in which people live. Sin is evident in oppressive structures. We can find it in the exploitation of groups of people by other groups of people. We can find it in the domination and slavery of people and races and social classes by others. Sin appears then as the fundamental alienation, the root of a situation of injustice and exploitation. If that’s the nature of sin, then I think you can see that sin demands a radical liberation which in turn necessarily implies a political liberation. And that’s indeed what Gutierrez and other liberation theologians call for.

What does he says specifically about salvation? Gutierrez says that the notion of salvation focuses on two basis issues. There is a quantitative one and a qualitative one, and it’s with that qualitative one that he really redefines salvation altogether. But let’s look first of all at the quantitative issue that is involved in salvation. The quantitative issue is the problem of the number of persons who are saved, the possibility of being saved, and the role of the church in that process. “This question,” Gutierrez says, “is answered by Paul’s statements to Timothy about the universality of the salvific will of God.” You’ll remember Paul says to Timothy that God has a desire for all people to be saved. This matter says that the present life; that is, this quantitative matter as well says that the present life is a test and ultimate salvation comes beyond this life.

On the other hand, there is the qualitative issue, and here Gutierrez says that the notion of salvation is qualitatively different. It is widened to embrace all of reality, not just personal spiritual relationship to God. Salvation deals with human existence itself in regard to having communion with God and with other people. Salvation from this qualitative perspective is not otherworldly, but it is now viewed as occurring within this world. Transformation and fulfillment of the present life are really the keys to this
kind of salvation. It isn’t a picture that says, “The blessing, the salvation is all postponed to a distant future”; rather there is to be transformation, a fulfillment of the present life right now. On page 152 Gutierrez says, “Salvation, the communion of men with God and the communion of men among themselves, orients, transforms, and guides history to its fulfillment.” As a result of this approach, no longer can we speak of a profane history on the one hand as opposed to a salvific history on the other. Instead all history is to be viewed as one history; that is, all of it is salvific. And it's to be seen as salvific because the salvific action of God underlies all of human existence.

On page 151 Gutierrez addresses this matter, and here's what he has to say. He says, “We can no longer speak properly of a profane world. A qualitative and intensive approach replaces a quantitative and extensive one. Human existence in the last instance is nothing but a yes or a no to the Lord. Men already partly accept communion with God, although they do not explicitly confess Christ as their Lord, insofar as they are moved by grace.” Here he quotes form *Lumen Gentium* number 16. Then he says, “Sometimes secretly,” and here he quotes from *Gaudium et Spec* numbers 3 and 22, “renounce their selfishness and seek to create an authentic brotherhood among men. They reject union with God insofar as they turn away from the building up of this world. Do not open themselves to others, and culpably withdraw into themselves.” And here he cites Matthew 25:31–46. From this point of view, the notion of salvation appears differently than it did before. Salvation is not something otherworldly in regard to which the present life is merely a test. Salvation, the communion of men with God and the communion of men among themselves, is something which embraces all human reality, transforms it, and leads it to its fullness in Christ. Thus the center of God's salvific design is Jesus Christ, who by His death and resurrection transforms the universe and makes it possible for man to reach fulfillment as a human being. This fulfillment embraces every aspect of humanity—body and spirit, individual and society, person and cosmos, time and eternity. Christ the image of the Father and the perfect God-man takes on all the dimensions of human existence.

The fact that all history is salvific is exemplified according to Gutierrez by two themes; namely, the relationship between salvation and creation on the one hand and the eschatological promises on the other. Let's look at each of those individually.
First of all the theme of salvation and creation, and Gutierrez says that “this theme shows that all history is salvific in several ways.” It does so in the first place when we think of the initial creation of the world and the creation of mankind. That initial creation of the world initiates history, it initiates the human struggle, and it initiates the “salvific adventure of Yahweh,” as he puts it. Also on the basis of Ephesians 1:3–5, Gutierrez says, “God creates all individuals to be His children.” Other verses that are used here to present this point are Isaiah 54:5 and then Psalm 74:89, 93, 95; Psalm 135; and Psalm 136. So when we look at the initial creation of the world and the human race, we find there that salvation is linked with creation.

But there’s another way in which we see that all history is salvific, namely, when we look at the self-creation of men and women by political liberation, and here the example, biblically speaking, that Gutierrez uses for this idea is Yahweh’s actions in behalf of Israel to liberate them from Egypt. And in doing that he created them as a new nation and saved them from bondage. The Creator, then, and the Savior of them is also their liberator, and as you can expect and imagine, this concept of the exodus and God’s actions on behalf of the people of Israel are oftentimes seen as a paradigm of what God wants to do for all people.

There’s another way in which we can see that salvation and creation exemplify the idea that all history is salvific; namely, salvation as recreation. Now here you might be thinking in terms of an individual being born again into the family of God, but that’s not the point that Gutierrez has. He says, “After God liberated Israel from Egypt, He took them toward the new land. In the process He recreated them to be a holy nation. The move toward the Promised Land is one in which injustice and oppression are removed so that there can be a recreation of the people into God’s holy nation, His special people. The work of Christ forms a part of this movement of recreation and brings it to a complete fulfillment.” You’ll remember the Scripture speaks of the one who is saved by Christ as a new creation. The work of Christ is presented, though simultaneously as a liberation from sin and from all of its consequences—consequences of injustice, of hatred, of despoliation. Human beings partake of this recreation, and they get involved in it as they labor to transform the world, therefore and thereby creating a new situation.

And here, as I close this lecture, let me read to you what Gutierrez says on this matter of recreating and salvation by recreating. He
says, “But the true agents of this quest for unity are those who today are oppressed economically, politically, culturally, and struggle to become free. Salvation totally and freely given by God, the communion of men with God and among themselves is the inner force and the fullness of this movement of men’s self-generation which was initiated by the work of creation. Consequently when we assert that man fulfills himself by continuing the work of creation by means of his labor, we are saying that he places himself by this very fact within an all-embracing salvific process. To work to transform this world is to become a man and to build the human community. It is also to say likewise to struggle against misery and exploitation and to build a just society is already to be part of the saving action which is moving towards its complete fulfillment.”

In our next lecture, we want to pick up the second point that I had mentioned a few moments ago: the point that all history is salvific can be seen through the theme of salvation and creation, but also through the theme of salvation and the eschatological promises. We were talking about Gutierrez’s claim that all of history is salvific and that that fact, he believes, is exemplified in two basic themes—on the one hand, the relationship between salvation and creation and on the other hand, the relationship between salvation and the eschatological promises. We talked about this theme of salvation and creation, and I want to turn now to look at the second of these themes, namely, the relationship of salvation and the eschatological promises.

Gutierrez says that the promises are things that orient people toward the future. In fact, he says “human history is nothing but the history of the slow, uncertain, and surprising fulfillment of the promise.” He tells us that the promises of God unfold, becoming richer and more definite in the promises that are made by God throughout history. “The promises of God are partially and progressively fulfilled,” he says, “as history goes along, but there’s a sense in which they also await complete fulfillment.” Gutierrez says that “the promise was incarnated in the proclamation of a new covenant and all of the promises that went along with that promise of a new covenant. The promise,” he says, “also enters upon the last days with the proclamation of the gift of the kingdom of God.” So there’s a sense for Gutierrez in which the promise is already fulfilled in historical events and yet it is not completely fulfilled.
He also reminds us that the focus of the prophets was the hope for the future. They had a future-looking ministry and emphasis, and that hope for the future was based on God’s fidelity to His promises. “However,” Gutierrez says, “there was another function to the prophetic work as well. The prophets not only looked toward the future, but they always had a concern for the present, historical situation.” So eschatology, then, according to Gutierrez, is a blending of these two aspects. You look toward the future and promises about the future, but on the other hand there is always a word that needs to be spoken to the present historical situation. On page 164 of *A Theology of Liberation* Gutierrez says, “The historical implementation of promises in the present are insofar as they are ordered as toward what is to come, as characteristic of eschatology as the opening to the future. More precisely, this tension toward the future lends meaning to and is expressed in the present, while simultaneously being nourished by it.”

So there are promises that are important and those promises are about a kingdom, but we might ask ourselves, what in the world does all of this have to do with liberation theology? It is linked to liberation theology when Gutierrez tells us that the promises of the kingdom entail liberation. “The kingdom only comes,” he says, “as there is the elimination of misery and of exploitation.” Let me read to you what he says about this on page 167 in *A Theology of Liberation*. He says that “we can say that eschatology does not lessen the value of the present life and yet express this in words which might be misleading. If by ‘present life’ one understands only ‘present spiritual life,’ one does not have an accurate understanding of eschatology. Its presence is an intra-historical reality. The grace-sin conflict, the coming of the kingdom, and the expectation of the parousia are also necessarily and inevitably historical, temporal, earthly, social, and material realities. The prophets announce a kingdom of peace, but peace presupposes the establishment of justice.” Then he quotes from Isaiah 32:17, which says, “Righteousness shall yield peace and its fruit shall be quietness and confidence forever.”

Then Gutierrez says, “It presupposes the defense of the rights of the poor, punishment of the oppressors, a life free from the fear of being enslaved by others, the liberation of the oppressed. Peace, justice, love, and freedom are not private realities. They are not only internal attitudes. They are social realities implying a historical liberation. A poorly understood spiritualization has often made us forget the human consequences of the eschatological promises and the power to transform unjust social structures which they imply.
The elimination of misery and exploitation is a sign of the coming of the kingdom.” So there you have the linkage of kingdom and promise on the one hand with liberation on the other. I’m going to pick up when we begin our next lecture.