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Intersectionality and the American Church

Culture & Crisis Conference
Reconciling Constitutionalism & Federalism in a Time of Crisis

by

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Introduction

In recent decades, the advent of ideologies such as Liberation Theology and Critical Race Theory have spurred dialogue and societal changes in the United States. These beliefs have set the stage for a new wave of Christianity in contemporary culture. In order to determine how these theories fit in with traditional orthodox Christianity, it is necessary to understand their respective beliefs, values, and worldviews.

Contemporary Theology

Background

Theology is the study of the nature of God and religious belief.¹ Throughout the history of the Christian Church, this has been done through studying the sources of Christian belief like the Bible and exploring the meaning of Christianity in context to their time period.² Over time, the common beliefs about theology have changed, based upon certain philosophies and cultural norms. In today's society, Christians in different parts of the world will have different conceptions of God and of theology based upon their individual and cultural life experiences.³ Though the definition of theology is quite broad, Christian theologians have narrowed down this school of thought into several distinct categories, one of which is soteriology, the study of salvation. It is important to understand how different groups of people understand Christian salvation so that one can know how to best communicate and relate with them.⁴ Some of these newer understandings include liberal theology, neo-orthodox theology, and liberation theology.

Liberal Theology

One popular understanding of Christian salvation is liberal theology, which has been called "the distinctive feature of 'modern' theology."⁵ The term itself describes the main streams of theological thought for the past two centuries.⁶ According to prominent theologians, Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher has been credited as the founder of Protestant Liberalism.⁷ This

¹ "Theology," Lexico, Oxford English Dictionary, accessed February 15, 2021, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/theology>.

² Paul Badham, "What Is Theology?," *Theology* 99, no. 788 (March 1, 1996): 101-106, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0040571X9609900203>.

³ Brian Gast, "To Understand People, Understand How They Perceive God," *Quadrant*, October 2010, <https://quadrantinternational.net/musings/how-people-perceive-god/>.

⁴ Gast, "Perceive God."

⁵ Peter C. Hodgson, "Liberal Theology," *The Expository Times* 122, no. 1 (September 14, 2010): 4-10, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0014524610377044>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ted A. Campbell, *Christian Confessions: A Historical Introduction* (United Kingdom: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 1996), 128.

ideology first came about in the late 18th century, and was a Protestant attempt to reconfigure the traditional Christian teaching in light of the modern knowledge and values of that time period.⁸ It was an offshoot of Enlightenment Rationalism and Romanticism, which demanded new ways of thinking about reason, religion, and culture.⁹

Liberal theology has many distinct beliefs that have set it apart from other theological camps. For example, true followers of liberation theology reject any notion of the supernatural, including miracles, and deny biblical authority.¹⁰ In addition to this, they believe in human perfectibility and the progressive evolution of mind and society.¹¹ Not only that, but liberal theology argues that one should not be concerned with their own personal salvation, but rather with a concern for social salvation.¹² This re-labels Christianity as a movement of social reconstruction as opposed to salvation and deliverance.¹³

Due to these ideological positions, liberal theology has shown itself to be a re-conception of salvation as opposed to previous theologies.¹⁴ In accordance with social salvation, these theologians believe that salvation is man's doing, not God's doing. In denying supernaturalism and biblical authority, liberal theologians stray from the path of orthodox theology. They believe that true religion is the way of Christ, not any particular doctrines about Christ, which is a significant departure from historic orthodoxy.¹⁵

Neo-Orthodox Theology

Another predominant theory of salvation is Neo-Orthodox Theology, which moved away from the strong optimism of liberal theology and focused on traditional Christian roots.¹⁶ It was a theological movement that developed in the mid-twentieth century, after World War I and II, and

⁸ Kevin DeYoung, "Seven Characteristics of Liberal Theology," *The Gospel Coalition*, September 26, 2017, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/seven-characteristics-of-liberal-theology/>.

⁹ Hodgson, "Liberal Theology," 5.

¹⁰ Ryan Nelson, "Dr. Mike Heiser Explains What a Theological Liberal Is," *Faithlife Blog*, July 21, 2015, <https://blog.faithlife.com/blog/2015/07/dr-mike-heiser-explains-what-a-theological-liberal-is/>.

¹¹ "Beyond the Half-Way House: Evangelicalism and the Shaping of English Canadian Culture," Review Essays / Notes critiques, *Acadiensis*, accessed February 15, 2021, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/268156321.pdf>.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805-1900* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2001).

¹⁴ DeYoung, "Seven Characteristics."

¹⁵ Dorrien, *Progressive Religion*.

¹⁶ "Neoorthodoxy: Protestant theological movement," Britannica, last modified April 15, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/neoorthodoxy>.

was created by Karl Barth and Emil Brunner.¹⁷ It was created as a reaction to liberal theology and was heavily influenced by Soren Kierkegaard's existentialism and by reformed theology.¹⁸

In contrast to liberal theology, neo-orthodox theology believes in the supernatural, although there are some proponents who teach that the Bible is not truly the Word of God, but rather a series of true statements.¹⁹ Additionally, neo-orthodox theology emphasizes the transcendence of God and man's responsibility.²⁰ Although neo-orthodoxy believes that salvation is truly a work of God, these theologians argue that all of humanity is elect in Christ, which is the notion of universalism.²¹ The theory of universalism proposes that all people will be saved, which ignores God's justice and holiness, and thus is ultimately flawed.²²

Liberation Theology

One of the most prominent ideologies that has emerged in recent history is liberation theology, which argues that Christians should reconstruct theology by seeing it through the axis of the oppressor and the oppressed.²³ There are several lenses by which these theologians viewed their ideology, primarily class, race, and gender.²⁴ Liberation theology arose in the 1970's, and the main proponent is Gustavo Gutiérrez, who wrote that it is the Christian duty to aid the poor and oppressed through involvement in civic and political affairs.²⁵ It was influenced by Gutiérrez's background as a poor man in Latin America, and centered on how to solve today's issues of poverty and oppression.

Liberation theology characterizes salvation as deliverance from oppression and advocates that man should be saved not only from their sins, but from their economic and political bondage as well. These theologians believed that the way to liberate these people was through social movements and political involvements dedicated to overturning the structures of society.²⁶ For this reason, liberation theologians used Marxist theory as an analytical tool through which to view

¹⁷ Sanghoon Jee, "An Overview of Karl Barth's Theology: Focused on the Doctrines of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit," *Human Behavior, Development and Society* 21, no. 1 (March 11, 2020): 38-46, <https://so01.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/hbds/article/view/234779/163655>.

¹⁸ M. B. Schepers, "Neo-Orthodoxy," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, last modified January 12, 2021, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/neo-orthodoxy-0>.

¹⁹ Ken Silva, "Neo-Orthodoxy: An Emergent Overview," *Aspiring Ministries*, August 30, 2008, <https://www.apprising.org/2008/08/30/neo-orthodoxy-an-emergent-overview/>.

²⁰ Jee, "An Overview," 38.

²¹ Silva, "Neo-Orthodoxy."

²² Jack Zavada, "What is Universalism?," *Learn Religions*, last modified June 25, 2019, <https://www.learnreligions.com/what-is-universalism-700701>.

²³ John M. Frame, "Liberation Theology," *The Gospel Coalition*, 2015, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/liberation-theology/>.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A theology of liberation: history, politics, and salvation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1972).

²⁶ Frame, "Liberation Theology."

and revise traditional Christian doctrine.²⁷ Liberation theology focused on many different facets such as class, race, and gender, and developed into combinations thereof, such as Black Feminism. These combinations are what is known as intersectionality.

Intersectionality is defined as “the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.”²⁸ This theory helps one to determine how the experiences of all people shape the experiences of each other, and how those relationships are defined and enforced through societal institutions and power structures.²⁹ Intersectional thinking in theology allows Christians to better understand God’s justice and how biblical texts ought to be interpreted.³⁰ The Samaritan woman at the well demonstrates the importance of intersectionality to exploring the biblical text, as the societal role of her gender, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and class were key to understanding the implications of Jesus speaking to her.³¹ Thus, intersectionality should be seen as an important tool for understanding the nuances of the Bible, and for understanding how these interactions apply to Christians today.

Social Justice

Introduction

In today’s society, there have been many examples of injustice and oppression not only in the United States, but in the entire world. The Bible calls for Christians to love one another and to help those that are suffering and discriminated against. Proverbs 31:8-9 NIV states “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.” Thus, Christians should care about social justice and helping those who are oppressed. In addition to a Christian perspective on social justice, there are also secular groups that have promoted social justice. The terms ‘justice’ and ‘social justice’ mean different things, which often eludes many when determining how Christians ought to approach societal issues. While ‘justice’ is defined as “the administration of law or equity,”³² ‘social justice’ is “justice at the level of a society or state as regards the possession of

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ “Intersectionality,” Oxford English Dictionary, accessed February 15, 2021, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/429843>.

²⁹ Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Thornton Dill, “Theorizing Difference from Multiracial Feminism,” *Feminist Studies* 22, no. 2 (Summer, 1996): 321-331, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178416>.

³⁰ Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, “Applying Intersectionality to Theology and the Bible,” in *Intersectional Theology: An Introductory Guide*, (1517 Press, Fortress Press, 2018): 68, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv47w2f6.8>.

³¹ Ibid, 74-75.

³² “Justice,” Oxford English Dictionary, accessed February 15, 2021, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/102198>.

wealth, commodities, opportunities, and privileges.”³³ With these definitions in mind, the ‘justice’ pursues what is right according to an absolute, impartial standard, whereas ‘social justice’ pursues what is believed to be lacking for some based on what is believed to be possessed by others.³⁴

Traditional Biblical Perspective

From a traditional orthodox perspective, God calls for Christians to pursue justice by caring for those in need and preaching the Gospel to them. There are many Christians that confuse the terms ‘justice’ and ‘social justice,’ and think that social justice is simply Biblical justice as it applies to the social aspect of their lives. However, this is not the case, and it is imperative that these terms be carefully defined so as to ensure that each person understands the conversation that needs to be had. Justice is then incompatible with social justice, as justice necessitates impartiality and for everyone to be treated the same, whereas social justice takes into account the different societal standings of everyone and tries to eliminate all inequalities. It is not wrong to understand how social structures implicate relations between people and how society privileges some persons above others. Likewise, it would be wrong to ignore the legitimate needs of others or take advantage of people.³⁵ However, the concept that each person is owed what another has for the sake of complete equality is inherently flawed and impossible to achieve.

Thus, it is important to recognize the social justice is not biblical justice. The theories of social justice arise from a Marxist perspective and argue that there should be a redistribution of goods in order to ensure equality of outcome for all people, which is also known as distributive justice.³⁶ The Bible says that Christians are not guaranteed anything their lives on Earth, but rather, according to Matthew 6:20, that they should store up their treasures in Heaven. One’s societal standing is not guaranteed in this world, as the Lord wills for each person’s life to be different.³⁷

Liberation Theology Perspective

The theory of liberation theology attempts to combine the ideas of biblical justice and social justice to bring about the best of both worlds. Liberation theology is a theology of action, and thus attempts to take political action to establish equality for all peoples through actions like

³³ “Social Justice,” Oxford English Dictionary, accessed February 15, 2021, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/183739#eid132635090>.

³⁴ “Social Justice: Why Jesus Didn’t Pursue It + Why the Church Shouldn’t Fight for It,” *Truth and Fire*, September 21, 2018, <http://www.truthandfire.com/news-bedford/2018/9/20/social-justice-why-jesus-didnt-pursue-it-why-the-church-shouldnt-fight-for-it>.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Christian Barry, “Redistribution,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/redistribution/>.

³⁷ *Truth and Fire*, “Social Justice.”

protests, lobbying, and voting.³⁸ Those that subscribe to liberation theology and social justice would argue that social justice is a form of biblical justice, and that Christians should support ideas such as the redistribution of wealth and other Marxist theories.³⁹ In addition to this, many liberation theologians will take an intersectional perspective to better understand societal relations. An intersectional view can help Christians address certain social issues with a more nuanced analysis and allow them to practice their faith through taking political action in the Church and in the world.⁴⁰

Secular Perspective

As has been shown, traditional orthodoxy and liberation theology vary greatly in their understandings of the Bible and of social justice. However, both of these perspectives differ substantially from the secular perspective. Both liberation theology and secular theories of social justice focus on intersectionality and minimizing oppression, but the starting point of these two is very different. One prominent secular perspective of social justice is Critical Race Theory, which is the view that the law and legal institutions are inherently racist, and that race is a social construct used by white people to further their economic and political interests at the expense of people of color.⁴¹ In the wake of police brutality and the unjust killings of many Black Americans in the summer of 2020, secular groups such as Black Lives Matter promoted new ideas of social justice that redefined how society ought to function, namely that of Critical Race Theory.

Black Lives Matter is a secular organization that promotes Marxist ideology and understandings of social justice.⁴² On their website, they have a list of demands, including to defund the police, pass legislation to stop police brutality, and fight against heightened surveillance against Black communities.⁴³ The leaders of the political organization Black Lives Matter are professed Marxists that seek social justice through the redistribution of wealth, defunding of the police, and the abolishment of capitalism.⁴⁴ This understanding of political justice is one that many Americans are familiar with today. It is important to know how social justice and biblical justice conflict and coincide in order to determine how Christians ought to respond to the problems in today's society.

³⁸ David Dillard-Wright, "Liberation Theology, Economic Inequality, and Social Justice," *Sophia*, accessed February 15, 2021, <https://www.sophia.org/tutorials/liberation-theology-economic-inequality-and-social--3>.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, "Conclusion," in *Intersectional Theology: An Introductory Guide* (1517 Press, Fortress Press, 2018): 108, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv47w2f6.10>.

⁴¹ Tommy Curry, "Critical race theory," *Britannica*, last modified May 28, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/critical-race-theory>.

⁴² Matthew J. Peterson, "The Radical Marxism of BLM," *The American Mind*, September 1, 2020, <https://americanmind.org/features/the-racial-marxism-of-blm/>.

⁴³ "BLM Demands," Black Lives Matter, accessed February 15, 2021, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/blm-demands/>.

⁴⁴ Peterson, "Radical Marxism."

Reconciliation

Introduction

Today, the American Church is faced with the challenge of how to reconcile the progressive theories of liberation theology and Critical Race Theory with the established orthodoxy of Christianity. There are many ways in which liberation theology aligns with the established orthodoxy, in that they both profess Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, believe the Bible is God's Word, and that Christians are called to love their neighbors and take care of them. However, there are also many differences between these two ideologies. One of the main distinctions between these two camps is that liberation theology focuses heavily on the temporary issues in today's society, whereas traditional orthodoxy acknowledges the current problems, but focuses on the eternal issues of evangelism and salvation. This is not to say that the other ideology disregards a certain perspective, but simply that they prioritize one over the other. Liberation theology differs from traditional orthodoxy in the ways that they approach solving contemporary problems in society, but both ideologies agree on the importance of the Bible and salvation.

The perspective of liberation theology does not easily come to everyone, as many facets of it focus on specific groups of people who share a specific societal standing. However, some aspects of liberation theology are a good framework for many Christians, as it allows the Gospel to be more relatable to them and helps them better understand their place in the world because of it. Although the Bible does not call for 'social justice,' as in the redistribution of wealth and equality of outcome, it does call for establishing justice in society, which involves liberating oppressed groups from institutions where they are discriminated against.

Conclusion

Throughout Christian history, there have been several waves of theology that have re-defined certain biblical concepts such as salvation and justice. The most recent branch of this is liberation theology, which calls for Christians to eliminate injustice in society and understand how intersectionality affects different groups of people. Many Christians have completely written off liberation theology, saying that it is in the opposite direction of traditional orthodoxy. Likewise, there are many Christians who have completely embraced this ideology. However, there is a middle ground between those two camps, where one can understand the principles of liberation theology and agree with its desire to ensure equality but disagree with its end point of distributive justice. In order to better relate to others and spread the Gospel more effectively, it is important to understand how these ideas conflict and coincide, and how they interact with secular theories of social justice.

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