

According to Wikipedia¹ *Liberation theology is a political movement which interprets the teachings of Jesus Christ in relation to a liberation from unjust economic, political, or social conditions. It has been described by proponents as “an interpretation of Christian faith through the poor’s suffering, their struggle and hope, and a critique of society and Christianity through the eyes of the poor” and by detractors as Christianized Marxism.*

The argument presented here recalls two aspects of Christ’s teaching: on one hand his separating sheep from goats² where the sheep (but not the goats) had compassion for the less fortunate, whilst by contrast allowing separation between things of Caesar and things of God³. So those seeing liberation theology as Marxist might align with the *things of Caesar things of God* distinction: let the world get on with its own affairs and keep your religion unsullied by the world. Whereas the liberationists would aim to be *sheep rather than goats*.

There seems to be a difficulty here. Some of us place ultimate importance on personal salvation. That seems to emphasises the first great commandment: to love God⁴. Others see their faith as important in the here and now: they are content to leave eternal life to God, and lean toward loving their neighbour⁵. From several utterances in the Gospels, Christ seems to scorn legalistic interpretations of the Law and prefers to offer forgiveness to sinners. In many places the Gospel cites his criticism of the Pharisees; whereas his understanding of human frailty is everywhere. He comes not to destroy the law but to fulfil it⁶—to extend it: murder encompasses anger. The Christian cannot love God without loving the brother.

Dietrich Bonhöffer starts his book *Nachfolge*⁷ with these words (in the English translation): “Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of the Church. We are fighting today for costly grace.” In essence, since God suffered death for us at great cost, we cannot benefit from His Grace cheaply; we must endure suffering too, recognising the obligation of discipleship, and so hoping for *costly grace*. One might suppose Bonhöffer would have abhorred the idea that the Christian should ignore the travails of the poor so as to keep his religion pure, yet whilst St James insists that faith must drive good works⁸, Bonhöffer sees works as worthless when separated from the call to discipleship. It is this puzzle that the Church wrestles with today.

Liberation theology became concerned above most else with the state of poverty manifest in South America. The founder, Gustavo Gutiérrez said: “I desire that the hunger for God may remain, that the hunger for bread may be satisfied... Hunger for God, yes; hunger for bread, no.” Would Bonhöffer have been a liberation theologian? How might Liberation Theology inform our own discipleship? What must the Christian believe and do in the modern world? The Sermon on the Mount⁹ must be taken literally, Bonhöffer insists. If ye love me, keep my commandments¹⁰. Love God through loving your neighbour. What is the value of a religious life aimed at the pure service of God, compared with a Christian politics fighting poverty?

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology

² Matthew 25:34-36

³ Mark 12:17

⁴ Deuteronomy 6:5

⁵ Leviticus 19:18

⁶ Matthew 5:17

⁷ Translated from the German as *The cost of Discipleship* © SCM 1959, ISBN 0-334-00259-1

⁸ James 2:14-18

⁹ Matthew 5-7

¹⁰ John 14:15