Our first article compared the three main theological approaches to the Bible (we called them Protestant, Catholic, and Neo-Protestant). In the second article, we offered a brief outline of the origins of feminist theology with a focus on Elizabeth Cady Stanton and *The Woman’s Bible*. The present article outlines Liberation Theology.

Ideas are not free-standing; one is linked to another. There are reasons why people hold to an idea. One example is the practice in some churches of infant baptism. With one starting point being that children are born guilty of sin, and another, the view that the rite of baptism is able to wash away this “original contamination,” the conclusion drawn is logical: that the church should practice the baptism of infant children. One idea links to another. It is a system, and results in a practice in the church.

There are also ideas which stand behind the idea of ordaining women to male headship clergy positions in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Our goal is to trace ideas to particular written sources. These sources employ particular ways of approaching and interpreting Scripture. These methods are called “hermeneutics.” In order to understand the varied hermeneutics we need to process the ideas which
underly them. In this study we examine certain original works teaching Liberation Theology.

Today’s Feminist Theology is a subcategory of Liberation Theology. By understanding how and why these theological systems function, we can grasp much that stands behind the urgent, if not implacable, thrust for Women’s Ordination continuing to manifesting itself in the Seventh-day Adventist church.

**Liberation Theology in Six-and-a-half Points**

Liberation Theology began in South America in the Roman Catholic Church in the 1950s and was well crystallized by 1971 when its most notable book, *A Theology of Liberation*, by Gustavo Gutierrez, O.P. (Dominican Order of Preachers), was published. Another key voice has been that of Leonardo Boff, a Franciscan Order priest silenced by the Roman church for his views. We will refer to documents by these key persons.

Liberation Theology can be summarized in roughly six points. And yet, previous to these six theological ideas we must understand one especially important item:

Before we can do theology we have to 'do' liberation. The first step for liberation theology is pre-theological. It is a matter of trying to live the commitment of faith: in our case, to participate in some way in the process of liberation, to be committed to the oppressed. . . . Rather than introducing a new theological method, liberation theology is a new way of being a theologian. . . . first we need to have direct knowledge of the reality of oppression/liberation through objective engagement in solidarity with the poor. This pre-theological stage really means conversion of life, and this involves a 'class conversion' . . . (Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, pp. 22, 23).

That is, preliminary to everything else, in Liberation Theology we are asked to enter into a full personal identification with the oppressed. The idea is that one should adopt a “class consciousness,” a Marxist-style viewpoint of two classes competing with
each other—an oppressed class versus an oppressing class. In other words, one’s
personal viewpoint should be that of the activist, the change-agent ready for conflict.
Notice, this is before even opening the Bible. This preliminary mindset is essential. This
idea, this bias, is to be retained and the Bible is to be read—from the very
beginning—from this perspective.

Tension over Liberation Theology within Catholicism is seen in the silencing of
Leonardo Boff (the Brazilian theologian quoted immediately above) by the Vatican for
one year in 1985. Later, in 1992, on point of being silenced again, Boff withdrew from the
Franciscan order. Liberation Theology was a significant idea, and had drawn the
Vatican’s significant attention. Boff’s writing also helps flesh out the characteristic points
of this theology.

The key ideas of Liberation Theology are, (1) the preferential option for the poor
and oppressed, (2) Marxist class theory, (3) reading Scripture through a “liberation
lens,” (4) engaging in a “theological political rereading” of the Bible, (5) orientation to
action, (6) the imperative of being a change agent working transformation in the
institutions of the culture.

The preferential option for the poor and oppressed is the idea that God (and
those who follow Him) are automatically in support of the poor and oppressed in the
world. This theme is key.

. . .[A] choice was made at Medellin that has been a decisive one for the church
during the years since then: the preferential option for the poor. By ‘the poor’ I
mean here those whose social and economic condition is the result of a particular
political order and the concrete histories of countries and social groups (Gustavo
Liberation Theology sets out to eliminate oppression. In Gutierrez' view, those especially oppressed were the poor of South America, but the preference for the poor is extended in a general way to all who are oppressed. It looks for

The creation of a fraternal society of equals, in which there are no oppressors and no oppressed, requires that we not mislead others or ourselves about the real state of affairs. . . . our active participation on the side of justice and in defense of the weakest members of society does not mean that we are encouraging conflict. . . (Gutierrez, p. 159).

But there is a problem in indiscriminately seeking liberation for the poor and oppressed. Groups vie for the label “oppressed,” yet some are “oppressed” justly so. False prophets, those practicing sexual sins, mediums, convicted rapists, and so on, are opposed by God. Satan and his angels have been delivered into chains of darkness to await the fires of their final destruction (2 Peter 2:4; 3:7), and could thus be viewed as oppressed.

The persons who believe in Liberation Theology see the church's role as being to end oppression and lead the world to a new unity that no longer manifests oppression, that will include the formerly oppressed classes. Exclusion is oppression, and those who exclude are seen to be oppressors. Those who insist on boundaries are seen as wronging others. Carried to its logical completion, this ultimately means the removal of sanctions against the “oppressed.” The inevitable flip-side of this coin will be the repression of those who had been identified as “oppressors.”

. . . the church must help the world to achieve unity, while knowing that ’unity among human beings is possible only if there is real justice for all.’ In a divided world the role of the ecclesial community is to struggle against the radical causes of social division (Gutierrez, p. 161).
Another point of thought in Liberation Theology is the use of a Marxist “class analysis” as a means of sorting out issues of societal justice. Reducing this to its most basic form, the idea is that the proletariat (working class/poor) is to rise up against the bourgeoisie—those who hold wealth and who are said to exploit the proletariat. Leonardo and Clodovis Boff state the following.

Underlying liberation theology is a prophetic and comradly commitment to the life, cause, and struggle of these millions of debased and marginalized human beings, a commitment to ending this historical-social iniquity (Boff, Introducing Liberation Theology, p. 3). In liberation, the oppressed come together, come to understand their situation through the process of conscientization, discover the causes of their oppression, organize themselves into movements, and act in a coordinated fashion. First they claim everything that the existing system can give: better wages, working conditions, health care, education, housing, and so forth; then they work toward the transformation of present society in the direction of a new society characterized by widespread participation, a better and more just balance among social classes and more worthy ways of life (Ibid., p. 5).

How are we to be Christians in a world of destitution and injustice? There can be only one answer: we can be followers of Jesus and true Christians only by making common cause with the poor and working out the gospel of liberation (Ibid., p. 7).

This explanation, also called the 'historico-structural' approach, sees poverty as a collective and also conflictive phenomenon, which can be overcome only by replacing the present social system with an alternative system. The way out of this situation is revolution, understood as the transformation of the bases of the economic and social system (Ibid., p. 27, emphasis in original).

...[L]iberation theology freely borrows from Marxism certain 'methodological pointers' that have proved fruitful in understanding the world of the oppressed... (Ibid., p. 28).
Liberation theology is about liberation of the oppressed---in their totality as persons, body and soul---and in their totality as a class: the poor, the subjected, the discriminated against (*Ibid.*, pp. 28, 29).

Later we shall return to this point---who it is who is presently defined as being “oppressed”---and its relation to Women’s Ordination.

The third idea can be described as reading the Bible through a liberation lens. Bible passages especially such as the Exodus with the deliverance from Egypt are among those chiefly cited. As Gutierrez says,

> The liberation of Israel is a political action. It is the breaking away from a situation of despoliation and misery and the beginning of the construction of a just and comradely society (Gutierrez, p. 88).

Gutierrez quotes appreciatively from Casalis:

> . . . the heart of the Old Testament is the Exodus from the servitude of Egypt and the journey towards the promised land . . . . The hope of the people of God is not to return to the mythological primitive garden, to regain a paradise lost, but to march forward towards a new city, a human and comradely city whose heart is Christ (*Ibid.*, p. 89).

The biblical books most favored by this theology are Exodus, “because it recounts the epic of the politico-religious liberation of a mass of slaves,” the Prophets, “for their vigorous denunciation of injustices,” the Gospels for the liberating actions of Jesus, the Acts of the Apostles, “because they portray the ideal of a free and liberating Christian community,” and Revelation “because in collective and symbolic terms it describes the immense struggles of the people of God against all the monsters of history” (Boff, p. 35).

The Bible is an extensive volume and it is not surprising that some will focus on some parts while neglecting others. However, determining that any part of the Bible shall be treated as privileged is fraught with danger. It makes one part a canon within a
canon, a measure within a measure. It opens the way to judge the Bible by an idea imposed upon it or built-up from a subset of especially emphasized texts, used such that God's other speakings in His Word are depreciated.

Related to and included in this liberation lens is an approach which has been called a “hermeneutics of suspicion.”

[T]he sociology of knowledge generates a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' which has been profoundly important for liberation theology. . . Such questions [“about the dominant understanding of reality”] lead to a new way of reading Scripture which in turn leads to a new understanding of reality. The sociology of knowledge calls into question the existence of any timeless or non-context-related metaphysics or ontology (Tim Gorringe, “Political Readings of Scripture,” quoted in John Barton, The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation, p. 70).

As we will see in this series, the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' means to approach the Bible with an attitude of doubt about the text rather than one of faith. The truthfulness of the text itself is doubted (the first problem); worse, the ability of the interpreter of the text to accurately identify what is true and false is anticipated (the second problem). The result of this approach is that text of Scripture is investigated, more accurately, judged, with reference to some idea external to itself. If the passage can be used in service of a preferred idea, the passage is favored; should it seem to speak against the interpreter's preferred idea, the passage is suspected of being inaccurate. In Liberation Theology, certain ideas are indeed imposed upon the text; the text is reduced to mere object to be used in support of the favored theme.

The fourth idea involves the distinct Liberation Theology way of reading the Bible:

The rereading of the Bible done from the basis of the poor and their liberation project has certain characteristic marks.
It is a hermeneutics that favors application rather than explanation. In this the theology of liberation takes up the kind of probing that has been the perennial pursuit of all true biblical reading, as can be seen, for example, in the church fathers—a pursuit that was neglected for a long time in favor of a rationalistic exegesis concerned with dragging out the meaning-in-itself.

Liberative hermeneutics reads the Bible as a book of life, not as a book of strange stories. The textual meaning is indeed sought, but only as a function of the practical meaning: the important thing is not so much interpreting the text of the scriptures as interpreting life 'according to the scriptures.' Ultimately, this old/new reading aims to find contemporary actualization (practicality) for the textual meaning.

Liberative hermeneutics seeks to discover and activate the transforming energy of biblical texts. In the end, this is a question of finding an interpretation that will lead to individual change (conversion) and change in history (revolution). This is not a reading from ideological preconceptions: biblical religion is an open and dynamic religion thanks to its messianic and eschatological character. Ernest Bloch once declared: 'It would be difficult to make a revolution without the Bible.'

Finally, without being reductionist, this theological political rereading of the Bible stresses the social context of the message. It places each text in its historical context in order to construct an appropriate—not literal—translation into our own historical context. For example, liberative hermeneutics will stress (but not to the exclusion of other aspects) the social context of oppression in which Jesus lived and the markedly political context of his death on the cross (Ibid., pp. 33, 34, emphasis in original).

What is contemplated is no conventional reading of the Scriptures, but a “rereading.” The crucial matter is less what the text itself actually says, more importantly, to seek in the text for its “energy.” The idea is to look for how it can be interpreted to bring more awareness of the need for liberation, so that society can be changed. Interpreting the content of the Scriptures is not so important as is making some manner of Liberationist application for today. Remember, application is favored “rather than explanation.” All of which helps us understand why the reading is said to be a “theological political rereading.”
Emphasis is on the social context. Special attention is applied to the social situation in the text, and then searches are made for ways to especially make use of the alleged parallel, so that the need for Liberation today will be better understood.

We must notice carefully what this approach to the Scriptures means for us. Whereas a conventional Protestant interpretation of a Bible passage seeks first and primarily to discover the meaning of the text to its inspired author, and only afterward turning to the correct application of the text to one’s life today, Liberation Theology rereading of a passage focuses on how the text can be used in support of the Liberation idea now. The emphasis is not actually upon the text, not upon it as source of revelation---but as tool for generating interpretations useful in calling for change in the present.

The fifth idea is the focus on action, praxis, doing something. Liberation Theology is less about the world of the text than it is about the world of the reader of the text today, and on changing the present world.

. . .[T]he theology of liberation offers us not so much a new theme for reflection as a new way to do theology. . . . This is a theology which does not stop with reflecting on the world, but rather tries to be part of the process through which the world is transformed (Gutierrez, p. 12, emphasis in original).

'The hermeneutics of the kingdom of God,' observed Schillebeeckx, 'consists especially in making the world a better place. Only in this way will I be able to discover what the Kingdom of God means.' We have here a political hermeneutics of the Gospel (Ibid., pp. 10, 11).

It [Liberation theology] seeks to be a militant, committed, and liberating theology (Boff, p. 39).
Liberation Theology is action-oriented. One must be where the poor are, stand side-by-side with the oppressed, not just think about something but do something. The work of liberating others is to be put into practice in some concrete way.

While the focus in this fifth item is on doing something, the sixth item tells what is to be done. The world is to be transformed.

It seems clear today that the purpose of the Church is not to save in the sense of 'guaranteeing heaven.' The work of salvation is a reality which occurs in history. This work gives to the historical becoming of humankind its profound unity and its deepest meaning (Gutierrez, p. 143).

A broad and deep aspiration for liberation inflames the history of humankind in our day, liberation from all that limits or keeps human beings from self-fulfillment, liberation from all impediments to the exercise of freedom (Ibid., pp. 17, 18).

To work, to transform this world, is to become a man and to build the human community; it is also to save. . . building the temporal city is not simply a stage of 'humanization' or 'pre-evangelization' as was held in theology until a few years ago. Rather it is to become part of a saving process which embraces the whole of humanity and all human history (Ibid., p. 91).

We would not expect to find this theme within Adventism. In the scheme of things, Adventists by definition, have embraced the prophetic scenario of Daniel and the Revelation. Yes, we understand that Jesus' followers are to work as Jesus worked in doing what we can to help others in a disinterested way that may help them come to a transformative experience. Still, our work is not to take a social gospel approach to grow this world into the kingdom of God. Jesus is coming again in righteous judgment to gather the redeemed to Himself. The wicked will be destroyed and this world will be reduced to ashes by the devouring fire of God. As Adventists, our mission is to live,
reflect and preach the Bible's message of invitation and preparation for Jesus' soon return. God sets our priorities.

But Liberation Theology sees the kingdom of God here, now, on planet earth. This world is to be transformed, and no other way is envisioned for achieving this than human political action. Liberation Theology is engaged in a sharp and relentless focus on initiating “social justice” in our world today. It is activistic and legislative.

Friere is right when he says that in today’s world only the oppressed person, only the oppressed class, only oppressed peoples, can denounce and announce (Ibid., p. 137).

[Liberation theology] launches an appeal to all theologians, of the First, Second, and Third world, calling on them to work out the social-liberative dimension of faith. And it is a once-and-for-all appeal: once theology as a whole has assimilated this call and made it its own, then the name ‘liberation theology’ can be dropped, because by then all theologies will be liberation theologies in their own way—otherwise they will not be Christian theologies . . . liberation theology longs and fights for a new society in this world . . . (Boff, p. 92).

And so, Liberation Theology says that “A radical revision of what the Church has been and what it now is has become necessary” (Gutierrez, p. 141). The situation of the oppressed must be changed. In the end, as Marxist theory suggests, Liberation Theology says that it will triumph. All theologies will be Liberation theologies. There will be no more oppressed.

Vatican Reaction to Liberation Theology

The Vatican saw Liberation Theology as an alien and essentially secular emphasis intruding into the church. Edward J. Lynch writes

Liberationists seek to change the object to which theology devotes its...
attention. They reject, with disdain, the notion that getting people to heaven is more important than getting them tolerable living conditions. Liberation theology is an attempt to change people's minds about what is most decisive and significant in their lives. In other words, liberation theology is a cultural challenge (Edward J. Lynch, “The Retreat of Liberation Theology,” in February 1994 “The Homiletic & Pastoral Review,” http://liberationtheology.org/library/the_retreat_of_liberation_theology.pdf, p. 1, accessed 2013-03-21).

The Papacy's solution to this challenge was to take

. . . issue with what liberation theology tried to say about the basic meaning of human life and what is most important to living that life. . . . John Paul's main enemy, since his election in 1978, has been modern secularism. For the Pope, liberation theology is part of this secularism (Ibid., pp. 2, 3).

It was recognized that the solution should be to reassert that the meaning of life is not found in the improvement of the material world, but in a focus on the spiritual and the eternal. The Vatican took this approach. As a result, the Liberation Theology movement in South America was greatly reduced.

It would take us beyond the scope of this article to pursue these questions further. The point is that Liberation Theology was identified by the Vatican as an alien, even secular challenge intruding itself into that Church. Incompatible with their authority basis of Scripture plus tradition, it was dealt with accordingly. Alas, the ideas of Liberation Theology have often found a more fruitful field in Protestantism where commitment to sola Scriptura has been dangerously eclipsed.

**Liberation Theology in Relation to Women's Ordination**

Liberation Theology is defined in part by its urgent location of and advocacy for an oppressed group. For Liberation Theology to function, a group must be located that
needs to be un-oppressed ("liberated"). Once located, its opposite "oppressing" class is easily identified.

When it comes to the issue of injustice between men and women as presently portrayed in our culture, the woman is seen to be oppressed by the man. In other words, women are equivalent to the proletariat, men to the bourgeoisie. Therefore, the man is to be displaced and the woman, liberated.

Liberation Theology is one member of a group of theological perspectives categorized as “Advocacy Criticism.” Richard and R. Kendall Soulen define and discuss the advocacy approach:

All interpretation is conditioned by the social location of the interpreter. . . the purpose of interpretation is to expose oppressive tendencies in the Bible and the history of interpretation and, so far as possible, use the Bible as a resource to confront and change current structures of oppression, whether social, political, religious, or academic. Practitioners of advocacy criticism regard these approaches as less, not more, vulnerable to ideological distortion than other approaches because they explicitly identify their theoretical presuppositions and cultural interests and do not claim to provide a value-free, positivistic knowledge (Richard Soulen and R. Kendall Soulen, Handbook of Biblical Criticism, 3rd ed., p. 1).

The approach means that the interpreter accepts that he is biased and that the Bible writers were as well. The Bible is a resource to be disassembled and deconstructed, one biblical idea pitted against another. Thus, the authority of the whole is replaced with the authority of the interpretor and his selection of a subset of material from within the text.

Beginning with the Liberation idea---before one even opens the Bible---cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, be any part of an authentically Protestant approach. Finding the liberation motif wherever one can find it in the Bible, or even inserting it, but minimizing or ignoring other parts of Scripture, distorts the message. It reveals a
merely utilitarian attitude toward the Bible. Liberation Theology openly moves to use the Scripture as the tool for obtaining a predetermined goal. The problem is brought to the Bible having been previously defined, and the stance of the “interpreter” is initially biased already in favor of the allegedly oppressed.

Seventh-day Adventists think of the center of revelation as being in the Scriptures; the Liberation Theology advocate sees human experience—his own—as the center, the dominant interpretive feature. The Bible provides an exploitable resource. Although claimed \textit{not} to be “a reading from ideological preconceptions” (Boff, p. 34), this is exactly what is happening.

For Liberation Theology, the basic authority for interpretation is not Scripture but the mind of the interpreter as he "reads" the current historical situation. There are no meaningful controls. The Bible is not the last word, nor even the first.

Liberation Theology affirms as its starting point a deliberate bias, a deliberate perspective brought to the Scriptures. But every understanding we bring to the Bible must be subject to correction by the Scripture. Opening the pages of the Bible for the first time and having an expectation and preunderstanding is inevitable. But intentionally maintaining and imposing an external understanding upon the Scripture’s self-revelation is a different matter.

Pulling all of this together, we can already see the basic contours of the Women's Ordination issue in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Liberation Theology is the framework upon which Feminist Theology builds itself.

Finally, there is the action and transformation aspect. The goal of Liberation Theology is to transform institutions, to identify the oppressed, identify the oppressing class, and to use whatever means available to bring revolution. In a church like ours with a representative form of polity, this means to legislate change within the church.
Conclusion

Liberation Theology began in the Roman Catholic Church after its embrace of the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation. The message of the Bible is changed. Liberation Theology moves the emphasis from preparing for the judgment, the return of Jesus, and the future, to changing the social situation here and now. The emphasis becomes social rather than personal. The Scripture is a mixed resource, some parts more useful than others. The experience of the individual is supreme over the total authority mixture. The Bible becomes mere dress-up, investigated for useful ideas to use in the advocacy of Liberation Theology ideas. There is a canon within a canon.

The Liberation Theology analysis of the situation of reality according to is class theory, one class versus another class. Bias in belief is anticipated, even encouraged. Conflict is sought out. Religious structures are to be transformed.

In our next article we proceed to a substantial discussion of second wave Feminist Biblical Interpretation---in many ways, the core of the matter.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Pastor Larry Kirkpatrick has served churches in Nevada, Utah, California. They presently serve in the forest fastness of Northern Idaho where Larry lives with his wife Pamela and their children Seamus (age 7) and Mikayla (age 6).