



*GRINGO/A* LIBERATION:  
FINDING SALVATION IN THE *JESÚS* OF LATINO/A THEOLOGY  
THROUGH AN OPEN-BORDER CHRISTOLOGY

---

A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Faculty of  
Fresno Pacific University Biblical Seminary

---

In Partial Fulfilment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Theology

---

by  
Dallas John Nord  
May 2019



© 2019 Dallas John Nord

All Rights Reserved

Accepted by the Faculty of the Fresno Pacific University Biblical Seminary in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts in Theology.



---

Dr. Mark D. Baker, Adviser



---

Dr. Peter Rios, Second Reader

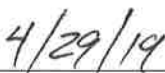
The views expressed in this thesis are those of the student and do not necessarily express the  
views of the Fresno Pacific University Biblical Seminary.

I grant Hiebert Library permission to make this thesis available for use by its own patrons, as  
well as those of the broader community through inter-library loan. This use is understood to be  
within the limitations of copyright.



---

Dallas J. Nord



---

Date

Abstract of  
*GRINGO/A* LIBERATION:  
FINDING SALVATION IN THE *JESÚS* OF LATINO/A THEOLOGY  
THROUGH AN OPEN-BORDER CHRISTOLOGY

---

A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Faculty of  
Fresno Pacific University Biblical Seminary

---

In Partial Fulfilment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Theology

---

by  
Dallas John Nord  
May 2019

Latino/a Christologies pose a problem for me. According to Latino/a theologians, Jesus—or rather, *Jesús*—is *un sato* (mongrel or “mutt”);<sup>1</sup> *un mestizo* (mixed),<sup>2</sup> “from the barrio”;<sup>3</sup> “a colonized man”;<sup>4</sup> the Other. They *say* that he makes a preferential option for the poor. The problem I have is that I think they are right. In making Jesus—or *Jesús*—more closely identified with Latinos/as, these theologians move him farther away from me—a white male person of privilege and power. *Jesús* came to bring good news to the poor and to set captives free. I am neither. So, what is my good news? Can a *gringo* like me be saved by *Jesús*?

Gregory of Nazianzus said, “that which [Christ] has not assumed he has not healed.” But Christ did not assume a *gringo* body endowed with privilege and power. He assumed a *mestizo* body, a Galilean body, a Latino body—a body *other* than my own. Yet, as I will argue, it is precisely the “otherness”—the foreignness—of *Jesús* which catalyzes the journey toward salvation for those of us who hold social privilege. It is my contention that if the *Jesús* of Latino/a Christologies is to be found salvific for persons of power and privilege such as myself, then an open-border Christology must be constructed in order to allow *Jesús* to remain Other and to open the possibility of a salvific new creation.

---

<sup>1</sup> Loida I. Martell-Otero, “*Encuentra Con El Jesús Sato: An Evangélica Soter-ology*,” in *Jesus in the Hispanic Community: Images of Christ from Theology to Popular Religion*, eds. Harold J. Recinos and Hugo Magallanes (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 77.

<sup>2</sup> See Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise, Revised* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Miguel A. De La Torre, *The Politics of Jesús: A Hispanic Political Theology* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 59. “Jesucristo is a street rat, a barrio kid, a spic from the ‘wrong side of the tracks.’”

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

This thesis takes an intercontextual approach, exploring what might happen when white Americans open their theological borders to receive the *Jesús* of Latino/a Christologies without an expectation of assimilation. I argue that it is actually imperative that *Jesús* first be known as Other before he can be known to us as Savior. When we open our borders to him, three phenomena take place within us which metaphorically mirror the sociocultural effects of opened geopolitical borders: (1) identities flare, (2) cultures mix, and (3) new creation is birthed. To walk the *camino* (journey/road) through these three effects ultimately results in our abandoning privilege and power in order to discover new identities in the liberated *familia* of *Jesús*.

Opening our borders to *Jesús* also creates a dilemma for how we read Scripture—particularly the gospels. If *Jesús* and his gospel are for the poor, oppressed, and excluded, then what good news is there for me? With whom do I identify when I read the gospel accounts? I suggest that by following the see-judge-act method prominent among Latino/a theologians, *gringo/a* readers can also find liberating good news in the gospel of *Jesús*, even if we are not the recipients of his preferential option.

Finally, to be saved by *Jesús* and to join his *familia* is to join the mission of liberation, engaging in liberative praxis in the midst of the ruling systems and powers. For many *gringos/as*, liberative praxis is a new idea. As those whom the systems and powers largely benefit, we have not thought to resist their hold on our lives. That is, until we defect to the kingdom of *Jesús*. Praxis for *gringos/as* will necessarily look different from praxis for Latinos/as. For the *gringo/a*, it will mean sharing in the sufferings of others, making a preferential option for the poor, empowering the powerless, confronting the powers of empire, and learning to do all things in a spirit of cruciformity.



Furthermore, liberative praxis requires that we engage in communal reflection with our *hermanos y hermanas* (brothers and sisters) to ensure that we have remained an alternative political body.

Liberation, it turns out, is for everyone. Not only are those oppressed and exploited by our society in need of *Jesús'* liberation, but we who possess power and privilege need his saving as well. There is liberation, even for *gringos/as*, if we only open our borders to meet *Jesús*.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM .....	1
<i>The Accent Matters</i> .....	4
<i>My Problem with Jesús</i> .....	6
<i>Structure of the Thesis</i> .....	12
<i>Key Terms</i> .....	12
SECTION I: MEETING <i>JESÚS</i> .....	15
CHAPTER 1: THE LATINO/A THEOLOGICAL METHOD .....	16
<i>Doing Theology in Spanish</i> .....	17
<i>See, Judge, Act</i> .....	22
CHAPTER 2: WHO DO THEY SAY I AM?: LATINO/A PORTRAITS OF <i>JESÚS</i> .....	26
<i>Virgilio Elizondo: Jesús the Galilean</i> .....	26
<i>Luis Pedraja: Jesús the Verb Made Flesh</i> .....	31
<i>Loida Martell-Otero: Jesús Sato</i> .....	35
<i>Miguel De La Torre: Jesús the Liberator</i> .....	39
<i>Jesus or Jesús?</i> .....	41
SECTION II: EXPLORING AN OPEN-BORDER CHRISTOLOGY .....	44
CHAPTER 3: AN OPEN-BORDER CHRISTOLOGICAL MODEL .....	45
<i>Joining the Postcolonial Conversation</i> .....	47
<i>An Open-Border Christology</i> .....	51
<i>Soteriological Effects of an Open-Border Christology</i> .....	55
Identities Flare .....	55

Cultures Mix.....	60
New Creation.....	65
CHAPTER 4: THE GOSPEL OF <i>JESÚS</i> .....	72
<i>An Honest Hermeneutic</i> .....	74
See: What is Our Context? .....	75
Judge: What Do We Read? .....	78
Act: What Shall We Do?.....	82
<i>Good News for Gringos/as: The Sermon on the Plain</i> .....	85
CHAPTER 5: PRAXIS FOR <i>GRINGOS/AS</i> .....	93
<i>Liberative Action</i> .....	94
Sharing in Suffering.....	96
Preferential Option for the Poor .....	97
Empowering the Powerless .....	98
Confronting the Powers .....	101
In All Things, Cruciformity .....	102
<i>Communal Reflection</i> .....	103
CONCLUSION: CONTINUING THE <i>CAMINO</i> .....	107
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	110

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A lot of life happened during the writing of this thesis. I would like to thank those who encouraged me, those who extended grace to me, and those who kept me focused on the completion of this project. Mark, thank you for advising me throughout this process. I am grateful for the wisdom you have shared with me. You have helped me practice a more gracious, centered approach in my thinking, writing, and living. Peter, thank you for acting as my second reader even in the midst of your own life changes. Lynn, thank you for helping me develop my thesis proposal and for making me feel more confident as a thinker and Bible-reader. Grace, thank you for helping share the stress of the writing process, for encouraging me to press forward even when it seemed so far from completion, and for reminding me that it is okay to struggle. Dad and Frank, thank you for being gracious with me as I required greater flexibility with my responsibilities on the farm. Thank you to all those who prayed for me, checked in, and expressed interest in this project.

Finally, I am immensely grateful to my wife, Alex, and daughter, Nevaeh. Alex, thank you for putting up with my late-night and early-morning writing sessions, for helping me think clearly when I was overwhelmed with stress, for lovingly reminding me when I needed to be more present at home, and for taking on extra responsibilities when I could not. Thank you for allowing me to pursue this passion and for affirming the direction I feel God has called me. Nevaeh, thank you for being patient and understanding during those evenings and weekends I was writing. I owe you many rounds of Uno!

## **Introduction: Theirs is the Kingdom**

Maria's Family Café sits at the edge of our small town in California's Central Valley. The morning sun glows through the summer haze, illuminating the fading paint on the southward facing wall of Maria's small building. At 6:30 a.m. on a Thursday morning, pickup trucks roll into the dirt lot next to the fading wall. I get out of mine, walk to the front door, stomp the mud off my boots as best I can, and open the screen door into Maria's restaurant. The table in the back corner, under the Corona Extra poster, was permanently reserved for us. Maria brings out coffee for everyone, jokingly scolds me for not drinking any, takes our orders (most of which she already knows), and then we open our Bibles and men's Bible study begins. The text for that morning was Luke 6:20-26—Luke's beatitudes:

Then [Jesus] looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

“Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

“Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The New Revised Standard Version will be used throughout this thesis, unless otherwise noted.

After the text was read, we sat in silence for a few seconds until someone spoke up.

“Well everyone is *spiritually* poor.” Heads nodded in agreement. Maria brought out toast, salsa, and more coffee. A few other men affirmed the spiritual reading of the text: “The kingdom of God is for everyone. . . . We just need to be hungry for God.” Maria served our omelets, *machaca*, and pancakes.

As I sat listening to our group that morning, I felt a tension within me. Luke leaves no room for a spiritualization of Jesus’ blessings, I realized. Blessed are the poor; woe to the rich. I thought, “We are not the poor. We are the rich. I am the rich. The kingdom is *theirs*, not mine.” That morning, though, I remained silent—unsure of how to dissent from the consensus reading. Breakfast ended, and I drove my white Silverado pickup truck across the railroad tracks, out to our family farm where I would mull over my theological questions amongst the almond trees and grapevines.

I am a third-generation farmer in a land-owning family of German-Mennonite descent. Though I am a member of the so-called “majority culture,” numerically I live as a minority in my hometown, which is over seventy-percent Hispanic.<sup>2</sup> My life as a white person living in the Central Valley of California is intricately intertwined with my Latino/a neighbors. On the farm, I see brown bodies labor arduously in our fields picking grapes, pruning vines and trees, chopping weeds. Their lips become dried from the dust; their brims stained with sweat; their hands calloused. I watch them come and go every harvest season and wonder what I ought to do as their Christian brother.

---

<sup>2</sup> “Demographics,” *City of Kerman*, updated May 2018, <http://cityofkerman.net/demographics/>.

For most of my childhood and adolescence, I was unaware of the differences in power and privilege that existed between myself and my Latino/a neighbors. Only later would I be taught that I lived a life very different from those of my brown and black friends. My best friend Jorge gave me my first real view of Mexican culture by allowing me to enter into his home, family, and life when we were teenagers. In college, my friend Ismael would teach me how Latino/a farm laborers viewed me as a white man on the farm. My white Silverado, he told me, serves as a power symbol; when a white pickup pulls up, farmworkers know they better put their heads down and work faster. Most recently, marrying into a Mexican-American family has exposed my privilege in often uncomfortable ways. My wife, Alex, offers a consistent, loving voice confronting me when I fail to recognize the hold of whiteness<sup>3</sup> over me.

Many realities have been taught to me by my Latino/a friends, including one relatively new friend who I am still getting to know. His name is *Jesús*. *Jesús* is an immigrant. He labors in the fields, speaks with an accent, and has come “to bring good news to the poor ... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, [and] to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). *Jesús* is the savior of the poor, captive, blind, and oppressed, but can he be my savior too? Before I can begin to answer that question, it is necessary to distinguish *Jesús* from Jesus.

---

<sup>3</sup> “Whiteness” will be defined along with other key terms below.

### The Accent Matters

When comparing Jesus and *Jesús*, the accent matters. In that tiny stroke of ink, not only does Jesus' name and its pronunciation change, his face does as well. The *Jesús* introduced to us by Latino/a Christologies is not the Jesus portrayed by Warner Sallman in his famous *Head of Christ* portrait. Nor is he the pale-skinned, brown-haired, blue-eyed Jesus which hangs on the walls of many white and Latino/a people alike. In this project, *Jesús* is not just a translation of this Jesus' name; *Jesús* is a radically different Christ figure with a very different face.

If your community is shared with Latinos/as, then the name *Jesús* might first bring to mind your Latino neighbor or friend, not necessarily your savior. In Latino and Latin American cultures, the name *Jesús* is not only reserved for God incarnate but is “an honor and a constant reminder of God's nearness” when given to a child.<sup>4</sup> Latino/a theologians, like Luis Pedraja, encourage and enable us to see *Jesús* our savior in the very face of *Jesús* our neighbor. Pedraja writes,

Jesus is my uncle. He also was my next-door neighbor, a boy in my school, and a deacon in my church. Jesus is not just the name of God's Son, it is also the name of many of my friends, relatives, and neighbors in the Hispanic community. When well-meaning missionaries periodically came by the house to ask us if we knew Jesus, they were surprised when we would answer, “Yes, he lives in that house across the street.”<sup>5</sup>

The Christology put forward by Latino/a theologians is set *en lo cotidiano*—in the everyday—of Latino/a life. *Jesús* experienced and experiences what Latino and Latina people experience every day in North American society. He is *Jesús sato* (mongrel or

---

<sup>4</sup> Luis G. Pedraja, *Jesus Is My Uncle: Christology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 15.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*



“mutt”);<sup>6</sup> he is *el Cristo Migrante* (the migrant Christ);<sup>7</sup> he is *un mestizo*;<sup>8</sup> he is “from the barrio”;<sup>9</sup> he is *un bilingüe*;<sup>10</sup> he is “a colonized man;”<sup>11</sup> he is the Other. And he is also *Jesucristo, el Hijo de Dios*—Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

For Latino/a theologians, salvation begins with the incarnation. “[Latino/a Christologies] emphasize not just the what of [*Jesús*] (i.e., what he did for us), but also the who as important for salvation.”<sup>12</sup> It not only matters that God became human, but it matters what kind of human God became. It matters that *Jesús* was a poor refugee from Galilee. Virgilio Elizondo, the forerunner of Latino theology, has made the case that Galilee was a “symbol of multiple rejection.”<sup>13</sup> Galilee was despised both by Rome for being too revolutionary, and by Jerusalem for being too unlearned and too racially mixed (*mestizo*).<sup>14</sup> Yet God chose to incarnate Galilean flesh, effectively becoming “the fool of the world for the sake of the world’s salvation.”<sup>15</sup> *Jesús’ mestizo* Galilean identity in many ways mirrors that of Latinos/as today. Elizondo makes this comparison:

The image of the Galileans to the Jerusalem Jews is comparable to the image of the Mexican-Americans to the Mexicans of Mexico. On the other hand, the image of the Galileans to the Greco-Romans is comparable to the image of the Mexican-

<sup>6</sup> Loida I. Martell-Otero, “*Encuentra Con El Jesús Sato: An Evangélica Soter-ology*,” in *Jesus in the Hispanic Community: Images of Christ from Theology to Popular Religion*, eds. Harold J. Recinos and Hugo Magallenes (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 77.

<sup>7</sup> Luis R. Rivera, “*El Cristo Migrante/The Migrant Christ*,” in *Jesus in the Hispanic Community: Images of Christ from Theology to Popular Religion*, eds. Harold J. Recinos and Hugo Magallenes (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 135-154.

<sup>8</sup> See Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise, Revised* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Miguel A. De La Torre, *The Politics of Jesús: A Hispanic Political Theology* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 59. “Jesucristo is a street rat, a barrio kid, a spic from the ‘wrong side of the tracks.’”

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>12</sup> Martell-Otero, “*Encuentra Con El Jesús Sato*,” 76-77.

<sup>13</sup> Elizondo, 50.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-53.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 53.

American to the Anglo population of the United States. They were part of and despised by both.<sup>16</sup>

Elizondo's comparison is relevant to many other Latino/a groups in addition to Mexican-Americans. By sharing *Jesús*' multiple rejections and social powerlessness, Latinos/as are in a privileged position in the kingdom of God. In many ways they can see Christ more readily; they understand the revolutionary message of *Jesús* and are the inheritors of his kingdom. Blessed are you who are poor now; blessed are you who hunger now; blessed are you who weep now; blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you.

#### My Problem with *Jesús*

Latino/a theologians suggest that *Jesús* is a more accurate representation of the Jesus found in Scripture. De La Torre even asserts that Christ should be understood as "ontologically Hispanic."<sup>17</sup> By this he means that *Jesús* is not simply a contextualized Jesus but is a truer Jesus. It is not just a theological exercise to imagine Jesus being *like* a Latino living in the United States today. Rather, Latino/a theologians say that Christ truly was marginalized, excluded by multiple social groups, and caught between identities; he lived as Other. Just as these characteristics belonged to *Jesús* as a Galilean, they belong to Latinos/as in the past and present; they are integral to the very beings of both Christ

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>17</sup> Miguel De La Torre, "Constructing a Cuban-Centric Christ," in *Jesus in the Hispanic Community: Images of Christ from Theology to Popular Religion*, eds. Harold J. Recinos and Hugo Magallanes (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 59. Elsewhere, De La Torre writes, "*Jesús* is Hispanic because the biblical witness of God is of one who takes sides with the least among us against those who oppress them. The biblical *Jesús*, upon which Latinos/as construct a messianic ethics is, like them, Hispanic, informed by the historical identification of Jesus with those who suffer under oppression" (*Politics*, 15-16; italics not in the original).

and Latinos/as. In this way, *Jesús* is “ontologically Hispanic.” This *Jesús* offends the powerful and privileged and makes a preferential option for the poor and powerless.<sup>18</sup>

The problem I have is that I think they are right. Yet, in making Jesus—or *Jesús*—more closely identified with Latinos/as, these theologians move him farther away from me—a white male person of privilege and power. I am not a Galilean; I am a Roman. *Jesús* came to bring good news to the poor and to set captives free. I am neither. So, what is my good news? Who is *Jesús* to me? Do I need *Jesús*? Can a *gringo* like me be saved by *Jesús*?

I suspect that not all white American Christians will find my “problem” problematic at all. “Why would you need *Jesús*?” some may wonder. “What is wrong with Jesus? Haven’t you already been saved by Jesus?” These are valid questions that point to the value of contextualization. *Jesús* is the theological construction of Latinos/as for Latinos/as. In his identification with the lives of Latinos/as, *Jesús* is meant to be a “unifying symbol”<sup>19</sup> and a purifying, ennobling, and strengthening force<sup>20</sup> for the Latino people. Likewise, the Jesus that I have known all my life is a contextualized Christ. We may not always recognize him as such, but the white Jesus that I learned about in Sunday

---

<sup>18</sup> See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History Politics and Salvation*, trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973). This notion of a “preferential option for the poor” is, of course, central to Latin American liberation theology. The phrase was first used in a Latin American context in a letter written by Fr. Pedro Arrupe in 1968. Gustavo Gutiérrez was the first to use it as a theological concept in his seminal book *Teología de la liberación, Perspectivas* in 1971 (English translation, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, 1973). The influence of this notion has since spread into Latino and Latina theology—both Catholic and Protestant.

<sup>19</sup> De La Torre, “Constructing,” 62.

<sup>20</sup> Elizondo, I. Elizondo writes, “It is my firm conviction that the identity and mission of the Mexican-American people will not only continue but will be purified, ennobled, and strengthened by its discover of its fundamental identity and mission in its acceptance and following of the [*Jesús*] of Nazareth as the Lord of history and life.”

school is just as contextualized as the *Jesús* of Latino/a theology. The white Jesus speaks proper English, he looks European, he teaches rational propositional truths, he talks of religious matters (not political ones), and he is strong, powerful, and assertive—never showing vulnerability or pain.<sup>21</sup> All of these characteristics are indeed ideals in white American society. By constructing Jesus in this way, he becomes relatable, comprehensible, attractive, and unifying. This Jesus is *our* Jesus. Why, then, would I need to seek after a different Jesus?

My answer to that question is twofold. First, I am convinced by Latina and Latino theologians (and other nonwhite Christians) that there are serious problems with the Jesus presented by the white American church. Not only is this Jesus a distortion of the one we find in the gospels, but he has also been used as a tool of Empire. While many of us came to know God through the western, white Jesus, it is also this Jesus that has been used to justify great atrocities and abuses of power. De La Torre observes, “One simply needs to think of the witch burnings, the Inquisition, the crusades, the conquistadores, or the militarism of *pax americana* for examples of a Jesus created by political leaders to justify repression and subjugation.”<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Latino/a theologians offer us *Jesús* as a corrective postcolonial Christology which is conscious of this history and intends to remain truer to the revolutionary and liberating Christ seen in Scripture.

---

<sup>21</sup> *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 148. Justo González identifies Nestorianism as a temptation for the western church because it allows *Jesús* to be split into two persons thereby disallowing the divine to actually suffer. Unlike the Latin American and Latino churches, the western church has preferred to “protect” Christ from his work of suffering. González writes, “Nestorianism has never been a temptation for Hispanic Christians. The reason for this is that we feel the need to assert that the broken, oppressed, and crucified [*Jesús*] is God. A disjunction between divinity and humanity in Christ that denies this would destroy the greatest appeal of [*Jesús*] for Hispanics and other groups who must live in suffering.”

<sup>22</sup> De La Torre, *Politics*, 2.

It is here that Latino/a theology cannot be dismissed as only a contextual theology. While it may be easy to excuse ourselves from “contextual” conversations, presuming that such conversations are “theirs,” we white theologians cannot dismiss the theological questions and constructions of others. Even if directed toward their respective in-groups, nonwhite contextual theologies deserve our attention. Academic theology has historically been constructed and exported by western Europe and North America. It should not be surprising that we—like everyone else—have a certain bias or set of lenses through which we read Scripture and do theology. Reading and dialoguing with theologies from different contexts and worldviews, then, may be “mutually corrective.”<sup>23</sup> Only those who live and think from outside our contexts can teach us what we have not seen. If we do not learn to listen to our brown and black brothers and sisters, then we white believers will never truly understand their experiences, nor find redemption from the sins we have enacted in the past and present against them, nor be freed from our own chains of bondage.

Likewise, we no longer live in a world in which we can maintain homogenous communities. Our contexts are not singular. They are actually convergence zones where multiple cultures collide. We cannot ignore this phenomenon but must engage the Others around us. Brian McLaren notes, “the Christian faith of the future must be a joint enterprise in which the descendants of the colonized and the descendant of the colonizers come together, reflect on the past and imagine a different and better future together.”<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> William A. Dyrness, *Learning about Theology from the Third World* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1990), 22.

<sup>24</sup> Brian D. McLaren, “Introduction: Why Postcolonial Conversations Matter: Reflection on Postcolonial Friendship,” in *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations: Global Awakenings in Theology and*

This brings me to my second reason for pursuing *Jesús*. If my life were not so interwoven with the Latino/a community, then perhaps I could keep my Jesus and leave *Jesús* to “them.” However, the intercultural nature of my life demands that I engage *Jesús*. I am reminded of him everywhere I go. I see the face of *Jesús*—the Other, the *mestizo*, the Galilean—in my Latino/a neighbors. I see his face at the grocery store. He is standing next to me in church. He is pruning vines on my family’s farm. I live in the convergence zone where white rural America meets Latino/a America—where Jesus meets *Jesús*. I am convinced, then, that whatever theological work I do will be enriched if it is done intercontextually. Doing intercontextual theology will require “imagining ethnic, racial, and cultural border crossing to entertain the possibility of encountering in various and different ways the God of all nations.”<sup>25</sup> This is my aim: to follow *Jesús* across any border necessary to find my salvation in him.

However, it is not immediately clear what my following *Jesús* looks like. The Christological work of Latino/a scholars is, after all, not necessarily directed at white theologians such as myself. Of course, Latino/a theologians are not seeking to be exclusive. While they are convinced that *Jesús* is the savior of Latinos/as, many also hold that white Americans and people of privilege need *Jesús* too. De La Torre is one who thinks so:

Not only is the Latina/o *Jesús* salvific for Hispanics, it is also salvific for Euroamericans. If the Eurocentric Jesus of the dominant culture is responsible for spiritually justifying much of the oppressive structures faced by Hispanics and

---

*Praxis*, eds. Kay Higuera Smith, Jayachitra Lalitha, and Daniel L. Hawk (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 15.

<sup>25</sup> Harold Recinos, introduction to *Jesus in the Hispanic Community: Images of Christ from Theology to Popular Religion*, eds. Harold J. Recinos and Hugo Magallenes (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), xxi.

other non-White groups, then Euroamericans are at risk of worshipping a false messiah with no ability to save or redeem them, or anyone else for that matter. For the sake of their own salvation, Euroamericans must put away their Jesus idols and learn to walk in solidarity with the *Jesús* of the oppressed and the people with whom *Jesús* identified in the parable of the sheep and the goats.<sup>26</sup>

De La Torre's point is well taken. There is a risk (and indeed a reality) that the white Jesus might become an idol more than a savior. De La Torre says that we white Americans need *Jesús* "for the sake of [our] own salvation." But what kind of salvation does *Jesús* offer *gringos/as*? What type of *camino*—road or journey—must we traverse as we "learn to walk in solidarity with the Jesús of the oppressed and the people with whom Jesús identified in the parable of the sheep and the goats?" How might *Jesús* save us even while he makes a preferential option for the poor, not the privileged?

Gregory of Nazianzus once said, "that which [Christ] has not assumed he has not healed." But Christ did not assume a body endowed with privilege and power. He assumed a *mestizo* body, a Galilean body, a Latino body—a body *other* than my own. Yet, as I will argue, it is precisely the "otherness"—the foreignness—of *Jesús* which catalyzes the journey toward salvation for those of us who hold social privilege. It is my contention that if the *Jesús* of Latino/a Christologies is to be found salvific for persons of power and privilege such as myself, then an open-border Christology must be constructed in order to allow *Jesús* to remain Other and to open the possibility of a salvific new creation.

---

<sup>26</sup> De La Torre, *Politics*, 18. Italics not in the original.

## Structure of the Thesis

The development of an open-border Christology and its soteriological implications are the focus of this paper. Section I is intended to introduce readers to *Jesús* as presented by Latino/a theologians. Chapter one will focus on the way Latinos/as read Scripture and how they go about doing theology. Chapter two will then be a survey of *Jesús* portraits.

In Section II, we will explore the open-border Christology. In chapter three, I propose the framework of an open-border Christology, situating it within the wider postcolonial conversation and tracing the soteriological process and implications of opening our theological borders to *Jesús*. Chapter four then presents a reading of *Jesús'* Sermon on the Plain as a liberative text even for *gringos/as*. Finally, chapter five will culminate the discussion with a focus on praxis, asking what it might look like for *gringos/as* to engage in liberative praxis in American society.

## Key Terms

- *Gringo/a* – This Spanish term is generally used to refer to a resident of the United States. It is most often applied to white people and can also be used to signify any type of behavior that is considered characteristic of white Americans. “*Gringo*” or “*gringa*” are not necessarily insulting terms, though they can be used as such in certain contexts. I use the term in this work largely as a synonym for white North Americans.
- Latino/a – “Latino/a” and the plural “Latinos/as” refer to people groups originating from Latin American countries who are now living in the United States. The term is admittedly inadequate for it does not account for the great



diversity of peoples (Mexicans, Argentines, Cubans, Hondurans, etc.) subsumed into one category. Nevertheless, it is now the self-identifying term of choice for many and is the largest minority group in the United States. I have chosen to use the term “Latino/a” for its gender inclusiveness, widespread acceptance in academic writing, and respect for the Spanish language. Other gender-inclusive terms like “Latin@” and “Latinx” have grown in usage in popular discourse amongst younger generations but have been criticized by some for being a “form of linguistic imperialism.”<sup>27</sup> Occasionally I will use the term “Hispanic” in this paper in order to respect other authors’ choices of term when I cite or reference their work. “Hispanic” refers to all peoples related to or descended from the Spanish people, language, and culture.

- *Mestizaje (mestizo/a)* – The Spanish word *mestizaje* denotes the mixing of two disparate parent groups. *Mestizo/a*, then, is the adjective “mixed.”
- Postcolonialism – Postcolonialism is an emerging field of scholarship led by the colonized and descendants of the previously-colonized. While postcolonialism is a broader movement challenging the innocence of the western world, its systems, and its history, there is a significant field of postcolonial theology in which traditionally western approaches to Christian theology, Scripture, and church history are handled with skepticism by those who have been harmed by western colonialism. Many postcolonial theologians are proposing new ways of doing

---

<sup>27</sup> Gilbert Guerra and Gilbert Orbea, “The Argument Against the Use of the Term ‘Latinx,’” *The Phoenix* (blog), November 19, 2015, <http://swarthmorephoenix.com/2015/11/19/the-argument-against-the-use-of-the-term-latinx/>.

theology, new interpretive frameworks for reading Scripture, and new readings of the western church's history.

- Whiteness – Throughout this thesis I will use the term “white” to describe people such as myself who live with a relatively high degree of power and privilege in our society. Whiteness here is less a pigmentation and more a principality and power. I am following Willie Jennings in understanding whiteness as an organizing principle which affects us all—whether white, brown, or black. Whiteness is a power that identifies and evaluates humans according to their bodies' pigmentations rather than by their connection to a particular land.<sup>28</sup> Jennings writes, “Whiteness was a global vision of Europeans and Africans but, more than that, a way of organizing bodies by proximity to an approximation of white bodies.”<sup>29</sup> Those of us with said white bodies are the clear beneficiaries of the systems constructed by whiteness. Therefore, my usage of the term “white” as a descriptor in this work signifies those of us benefiting from the social constructions fashioned by the power of whiteness.

---

<sup>28</sup> Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 58.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

**SECTION I:**  
**MEETING *JESÚS***

## Chapter 1: The Latino/a Theological Method

Frank, my coworker and *compadre*, wears long sleeves and I wear short sleeves. While we both have the same goal in mind—to stay cool while working in the triple-digit heat of California’s Central Valley—we take very different approaches to that goal. Frank asks me, “Doesn’t the sun bother your arms?” and I ask him, “Aren’t you hot in those long sleeves?” We laugh, shake our heads in skepticism of the other, and keep working. The differences between Latino/a and white western theological methods are something like the differences between Frank’s and my philosophies of sleeves. Latinos/as do theology one way, and white theologians do it another way. However, the differences may be more significant than mere preferences. While Frank and I have different preferences regarding workwear, it may be true that one of us is actually better suited for the work we do. I am beginning to think that Frank might be right—maybe I ought to wear long sleeves to protect my skin from the sun. After all, he has been doing this type of work for sixty years; surely he has gained much wisdom from his extensive experience. Perhaps I have something to learn from him. Perhaps, also, we *gringo/a* theologians have something to learn from Latino/a theologians. Maybe the theological approach of Latinos/as better suits the work of theology in the contexts we increasingly share. Their emphasis on the everyday lived experience and goal of liberating action may prove to be more helpful theological work than the abstract foundationalism characteristic of western white theology.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> There are, of course, other forms of theology being done by western white theologians—e.g., postmodern theology.

The radical *Jesús* of Latino/a Christologies is so different from the white Jesus of western Christologies because he is the product of a different context, a different theological method, and a different theological aim. What follows in this chapter is a wider examination of Latino/a theology. *Jesús* can then be recognized within the Latino/a theological enterprise.

### Doing Theology in Spanish

In *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*, Justo González proposes that we read the Bible “in Spanish.”<sup>2</sup> By this he means that the Bible be read, not in the Spanish language necessarily, but with Hispanic experiences and perspectives in mind. Experiences of marginalization, oppression, and exclusion are not foreign to the scriptural narrative. Because they have experienced these themselves, Latinos/as help us see such realities in Scripture. González lays out a “grammar” of reading the Bible in Spanish: (1) The Bible is a political book in that “it deals with issues of power and powerlessness.” To read it in Spanish, then, is to read it “as exiles, as members of a powerless group, as those who are excluded from the ‘innocent’ history of the dominant group.” (2) To read the Bible in Spanish means that we “must be aware that even when we read Scripture in private, God is addressing all of us as a community of faith.” A Spanish reading fights the privatization of faith. (3) The Bible is not primarily for academic elites; it is for the children, the simple, and the poor. “To read the Bible ‘in Spanish’ means to give attention to what the ‘babes’ find in it.” (4) To read in Spanish is

---

<sup>2</sup> Justo L. González, “Reading the Bible in Spanish,” in *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 75-87.

to read “in the vocative”—“reading it with the clear awareness that we are not before a dead text, for the text that we address addresses us in return.”<sup>3</sup>

Luis Pedraja extends González’s thought to the larger task of theology. Not only should we read the Bible in Spanish, but we also ought to do theology in Spanish. “Doing theology in Spanish means that we need to examine the influence that power, politics, dominance, culture, and economic perspectives have in our theological work, just as González suggests we do with Scripture.”<sup>4</sup> González suggests that the particular perspective of Latinos/as is useful not only for the Latino/a community but for the entire church.<sup>5</sup> If that is so, then it will be useful for us to understand how it is that Latinos/as read Scripture and do theology. What sources and tools do they use as they read the Bible and construct their theology? What do we white theologians have to learn from Latinos/as?

The most immediate distinction of Latino/a theology is its emphasis on lived experience. For most Latinos/as, experience is not an independent theological resource. Rather, “experience is the medium through which our theology is acquired, shaped, and transmitted.”<sup>6</sup> All other sources—Scripture included—are colored by the hues of lived human experience. For Latinos/as, experience colors Scripture, and Scripture then

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 85-87.

<sup>4</sup> Luis G. Pedraja, “Doing Theology in Spanish: Hispanic Theological Methodology, Dialogue, and Rationality,” in *Hispanic Christian Thought at the Dawn of the 21st Century: Apuntes in Honor of Justo L. González*, eds. Alvin Padilla, Roberto Goizueta, and Eldin Villafañe (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 169. Also see *Jesus is My Uncle: Christology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 16-22

<sup>5</sup> González, *Mañana*, 75.

<sup>6</sup> Pedraja, *Jesus Is My Uncle*, 18.

animates their lives. As González puts it, “the purpose of our common study of Scripture is not so much to interpret it as to allow it to interpret us and our situation.”<sup>7</sup>

Loida Martell-Otero explains that Latina *evangélicas* find hope in the narratives of Scripture because they resonate with their very lives.<sup>8</sup> In biblical texts such as the Samaritan woman *Jesús* meets at the well (John 4:1-42), the hemorrhaging woman whose faith heals her (Mark 5:25-34), and the hunched woman whom *Jesús* sets free from her suffering (Luke 13:10-17), Latina *evangélicas* see vignettes of their own lives and experience the same liberative healing that *Jesús* offers these women. Narratives such as these become sewn into the fabric of Latinas’ lives and devotions, finding expression in *coritos* (short songs of lament or joy) and *testimonios*. “Interweaving Scripture, stories, and songs, *evangélicas* share their experiences of Gods’ salvation in *lo cotidiano*.”<sup>9</sup> *Lo cotidiano*—the everyday—is precisely that space in which Latinas experience injustice, oppression, and exclusion, but also where they experience the healing salvation of God.<sup>10</sup> As they read the pages of their Bibles, Latinas use their experiences and sufferings to find themselves in the narratives. Having entered into the narrative, they then step back into *lo cotidiano* singing songs of hope and sharing stories of salvation. In this way, Latina *evangélicas* do precisely what González describes: using the Hispanic experience to enlighten their reading of Scripture, then allowing Scripture to in turn enlighten Latinas’ understanding of themselves and their people.

---

<sup>7</sup> González, *Mañana*, 86.

<sup>8</sup> Loida I. Martell-Otero, “From *Satas* to *Santas*: *Sobras* No More: Salvation in the Spaces of the Everyday,” in *Latinas Evangélicas: A Theological Survey from the Margins*, by Loida I. Martell-Otero, Zaida Maldonado Pérez, and Elizabeth Conde-Frazier (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 40f.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

Not all Latinos and Latinas value Scripture to the same degree. As we have seen, for González and Martell-Otero, Scripture holds significant weight especially when enlivened by the Latino/a experience. Others, like Ada María Isasi-Díaz and those in the *mujerista* stream of theology, understand Scripture as a mediated source.<sup>11</sup> However, what is common to virtually all Latino/a theologies is a utilization of experience as an interpretive key to other theological sources (Scripture, tradition, reason, imagination).

To a greater extent than most white theologians, Latino/a theologians know that their theologies are specific and particular. Because experience is integrated into every aspect of their labor of theology, they do not imagine that any theology can be neutral, objective, or universal. This is something that white theological traditions have often overlooked. The contextual loci of European or North American theologies have historically been left unacknowledged and unidentified, thereby enabling a presumption of objectivity and universality. Put another way, the *content* of European and North American theology is often disconnected from its *context*.<sup>12</sup> Latino/a theology, however, is done with a deep understanding of its particularity. Content and context flow together in a hermeneutical circle: content emerges from a particular context, the experiences of

---

<sup>11</sup> Ada María Isasi-Díaz, “Mujerista Discourse: A Platform for Latinas’ Subjugated Knowledge,” in *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy*, eds. Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 64. “Mujerista theology makes explicit the prima facie consideration that for some of us scripture and tradition are always mediated through those interpreting them, who are in a given context and respond to certain interests. Mujerista theology insists that the context and interests that should be at play in the reading of scripture and tradition are those of the oppressed and impoverished: their reality, how they come to know such reality, and how they interpret it.”

<sup>12</sup> See Simon C Kim, *An Immigration of Theology: Theology of Context as the Theological Method of Virgilio Elizondo and Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Eugene, Ore: Pickwick, 2012), 163-168.



that context are communicated through the creation of new content, and the circle cycles continuously.<sup>13</sup>

*Mujerista* theology in particular operates with an awareness of context and its natural connection to content. Ada María Isasi-Díaz explains that lived experience is the primary source of *mujerista* theology. Understanding that experience and the meaning made out of and within it is the first step of doing *mujerista* theology: “We need to start with what we know—ourselves, our everyday surroundings and experiences.”<sup>14</sup> Starting with experience (rather than Scripture, reason, or tradition) is not a non-theological or non-rational approach. “Rather, [*mujerista* theologians] expand the notion of rationality to encompass something other than abstract philosophical thought, thus, making their theology more encompassing, and more human, than others.”<sup>15</sup> Out of the context of Latina women’s daily lives, *mujerista* theology sprouts and flourishes to produce new content. That content, however, is not merely contextualized answers to old theological questions asked by the historically white church; the goal is not new answers, but new questions. Those questions (like, “Why is it that the majority of Hispanic Women do not relate to Jesus? What does this mean about their understanding of the divine and the presence of the divine in their lives?”<sup>16</sup>) are the content grown out of the soil of *lo cotidiano* of Latina women. They then feed into the context again, and the theological life cycle repeats.

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 163-164.

<sup>14</sup> Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha (In the Struggle): Elaborating a Mujerista Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 89-90.

<sup>15</sup> Pedraja, “Doing Theology in Spanish,” 172.

<sup>16</sup> Isasi-Díaz., 90.

## See, Judge, Act

An awareness of context is crucial to the work of Latino/a theology. Yet this is only the first step of three in the “see, judge, act” theological process that most Latino/a theologies follow (whether explicitly or not). First introduced by Belgian Cardinal Joseph Cardijn (1882-1967), the method has since been most notably taken up by Latin American liberation theologians and base communities.<sup>17</sup> The method is straightforward. Simon Kim, who wrote an in-depth comparative analysis of Mexican-American theologian Virgilio Elizondo and Peruvian liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, describes the process this way:

The method of *See, Judge, Act* does exactly what it states. Those using this method are called upon to *see* the conditions of their surroundings and the injustices within it. After considering the situation at hand, we are asked to *judge* how God, through the scripture and the Church, is calling us to respond. Finally, after seeing and judging the events around us, we must *act*—deciding on an appropriate action that responds to the moral imperative of this method.<sup>18</sup>

Starting with the everyday experiences of Latino/a people, then, is part of the first act of seeing. It is important that Kim specifies injustice as the focal point of the theological act of seeing for that is the catalytic element of the Latino/a theological process. For Latinos/as, the goal of doing theology is not to come to a perfect set of beliefs, but to take proper actions that lead to liberation from oppression and injustice. Latino/a theologians use various tools to see the conditions and injustices around them. *Mujerista* theology especially makes use of sociological methods like ethnography in

---

<sup>17</sup> Kim, 169.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

order to understand the lives of Latinos/as at the grassroots.<sup>19</sup> Only after seeing what surrounds and affects the lives of Latinos/as can the theologian move toward judging and acting.

In order to determine what proper action means within one's conditions and context, one must judge or discern the voice of God. This is where González's hermeneutic of "reading the Bible in Spanish" comes to the fore. However, González does not assume that the act of judging is as simple as opening the Bible and finding a blueprint for proper action. Such an approach to Scripture, he says, is unhelpful for those who, due to forces of poverty or oppression, lack the same level of agency that more privileged Bible readers might have.<sup>20</sup> Reading the Bible "through Hispanic eyes" (another of González's hermeneutical metaphors) is less about finding and following prescribed actions, and more about discovering true identity. When the poor read the Bible, González says, "What they find is . . . a worldview, and an interpretation of their own predicament, that put things under a new light and give them a new sense of worth and of hope."<sup>21</sup> Judging what course of action is appropriate, then, begins with fostering an identity steeped in the biblical narrative. Latino/a theologians, therefore, often ask

---

<sup>19</sup> For a detailed description and example of the use of ethnography in *mujerista* theology, see Ada María Isasi-Díaz's *En La Lucha (In the Struggle): A Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> Justo L. González, *Santa Biblia: The Bible Through Hispanic Eyes*, First Edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 116-117. González elaborates with examples including the following: "To read the Bible as a book of guidance, as many do, implies that one is free to make all sorts of choices about one's life. . . . But for those whose choices are often limited by social, economic, and other factors well beyond their reach, such a reading is insufficient. If I am a young man whose only choice, at least for the foreseeable future, is to work in agriculture as a migrant, it is highly unlikely that I will read the Bible asking what career I should pursue, as many of my contemporaries will be doing in a Sunday evening youth meeting in a suburban church."

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

“Who are we in Scripture?” Elizondo offers one answer: Latinos/as are Galileans like *Jesús*! Others answer that Latinos/as are like Israel in exile. Virtually all Latinos/as would also answer that they find themselves in the Exodus narrative.<sup>22</sup>

The Exodus account is central to Latino/a (and Latin American liberation) theology because of its exemplification of liberative praxis, which is what Latino/a theology is characteristically directed toward. The point of seeing is not just to identify causes of suffering, and judging is not just to evaluate Scripture. The first two acts of seeing and judging serve the purpose of the third: acting with the intention of overcoming the systems and powers which oppress. Just as Latino/a theology begins with the everyday—*lo cotidiano*—its goal is to return there. That is, the labor of theology begins with seeing the surroundings of Latino/a lives and aims to see those surroundings changed for the better through reflective action. Orthodoxy (correct belief) is not enough for Latino/a theologians; theology must be done with the goal of *orthopraxis*—correct practice—in mind. And orthopraxis is necessarily oriented toward liberation.

Latino/a theologians follow their Latin American counterparts in their work toward liberative praxis. However, the two cannot be wholly taken together. Due to the differences in their contexts (geographic, socioeconomic, political), Latino/a and Latin American liberation theologies address different issues as they journey toward liberation. Luis Pedraja states that there are more factors at play in the lives of Latinos/as in North America:

---

<sup>22</sup> Justo L. González, “Scripture, Tradition, Experience, and Imagination: A Redefinition,” in *The Ties That Bind: African American and Hispanic American/Latino/a Theology in Dialogue*, eds. Anthony B. Pinn and Benjamin Valentin (New York: Continuum, 2001), 64.

Hispanic theologies must confront a broader and more complex set of issues beyond the sinful oppressive structures that promulgate poverty. Hispanics must also address issues of acculturation, discrimination, racism, hybridity, and a complex socioeconomic situation that often makes us both oppressors and oppressed. While poverty and oppression still play a crucial role in our theological reflections, issues such as ethnic and racial identity, marginalization, sexism, culture, language, and popular religion are also central to our theologies.<sup>23</sup>

In essence, the Latino/a situation is in many ways more complex than the Latin American situation; there are more forces of bondage at work due to the in-between-ness—the otherness—of Latino/a lives.

If Latino/a theology does not move Latino and Latina people toward liberation in the matters listed above by Pedraja, then it is missing the mark and has likely been co-opted and fettered by the very forces from which Latinos/as seek freedom.<sup>24</sup> Any theological construction produced by Latinos/as must be a tool of resistance and empowerment. *Jesús*, the radical Latino savior, is one such tool—a very powerful one at that.

Before moving forward to examine *Jesús* as a contextual tool of resistance and empowerment, I must first ask a series of questions that I will take up in a later chapter: Can I follow the Latino/a theological method? Can a *gringo* do theology like a Latino? What would it mean for a white person with power and privilege to do liberative praxis-oriented theology? From what do we need liberation? What tools of resistance and empowerment might we produce?

---

<sup>23</sup> Pedraja, “Doing Theology in Spanish,” 171.

<sup>24</sup> Miguel A. De La Torre, *The Politics of Jesús: A Hispanic Political Theology* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 15. De La Torre warns that, “those Hispanics insisting on worshipping the Jesus that looks and acts like the dominant culture would in fact be worshipping the symbolic cause of their oppression.”

**Chapter 2:  
Who Do They Say I Am?: Latino/a Portraits of *Jesús***

As Jesus and his disciples made their way toward Jerusalem, Jesus asked them a question: “Who do people say I am?” (Mk. 8:27, cf. Lk. 9:18, Mt. 16:13). By this time in Jesus’ ministry, he was well-known and recognizable wherever he went. The crowds had seen his miracles, heard his teachings, and witnessed his conflicts with the religious authorities. Yet there remained various perceptions of who he truly was: “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets” (Mk. 8:28).

In a similar way, we readers of the gospels also see Christ in different manners. While all orthodox Christians ultimately agree with Peter that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, we characterize him differently. We interpret his actions and his teachings according to the frameworks we have inherited or constructed. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Latino/a theologians utilize a particular theological framework to make sense of Scripture and work towards proper action. In this chapter, a survey of Latino and Latina presentations of *Jesús* will be presented to display the Latino/a theological method at work as well as to draw out the contrast between the Latino *Jesús* and the white Jesus. Each of the following portraits of *Jesús* illustrates what it looks like to “read the Bible in Spanish.”

Virgilio Elizondo: *Jesús* the Galilean

In *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise*, Virgilio Elizondo presents what would become the foundation of Latino/a Christology. Elizondo prepared the way for other Latino/a Christologies by correlating the identity of *Jesús* with that of the Mexican-American people. By doing so, Elizondo invited other Latinos/as to find Christ in their own cultural and contextual positions. Specifically, Elizondo finds *Jesús* in the

Mexican-American reality of *mestizaje*, that is, the “origination of a new people from two ethnically disparate parent peoples”<sup>1</sup> that results in a dual-marginalization from both parent groups. For Mexican-Americans, their *mestizaje* marks them as foreign to both Mexicans and Americans. They are too Mexican to be American and too American to be Mexican.<sup>2</sup> As a result, they are viewed as a threat to the purity of both groups. They straddle the cultural borderline—one foot in Mexican and the other in American culture—and are therefore viewed as an alien entity in each. This cultural straddling disqualifies Mexican-Americans from total acceptance among either side, but it does allow them a privileged viewpoint into both worlds. Elizondo explains,

a *mestizo* group represents a particularly serious threat to its two parent cultures. The *mestizo* does not fit conveniently into the analysis categories used by either parent group. The *mestizo* may understand them far better than they understand him or her. To be an insider-outsider, as is the *mestizo*, is to have closeness to and distance from both parent cultures. A *mestizo* people can see and appreciate characteristics in its parent cultures that they see neither in themselves nor in each other. It is threatening to be in the presence of someone who knows us better than we know ourselves.<sup>3</sup>

The privilege of the *mestizo*’s viewpoint is, in fact, not a social privilege. Their view into each culture ends up furthering the perceived threat to each side. It is only a privilege, Elizondo might argue, when the *mestizo* discovers that *Jesús* too was caught between cultures and identities.

*Jesús*, Elizondo says, shares the dual-marginality of Mexican-Americans because he is a Galilean, and Galileans face rejection from both the religious elites of Jerusalem

---

<sup>1</sup> Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise*, Revised (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Elizondo, 21. “In Mexico they are not accepted as ‘regular’ Mexicans. . . . Nor have they been accepted within North American society.”

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

for not being Jewish enough and from Rome for not being Roman enough.<sup>4</sup> Galileans were in a perpetual state of in-between-ness. By virtue of their Jewish identity, Galileans were excluded from Roman society; they were among the colonized and Rome was the colonizer. Yet even within Judaism, Elizondo argues, Galileans were looked down upon because of their perceived lack of religious devotion and purity.<sup>5</sup> According to Elizondo, Galilean Jews were scorned for syncretism, lax religious adherence, and even improper pronunciations and dialect.<sup>6</sup> Facing rejection from both sides, Galilean Jews found themselves caught between social groups. They too straddled cultural borders. They were *mestizos*. *Jesús* was *mestizo*.

The *mestizo* nature of *Jesús*' social existence is not an incidental characteristic of Christ. Rather, Elizondo argues, it is entirely essential to God's act of liberation. Galilee is part of the plan. "The apparent nonimportance and rejection of Galilee," he says, "are the very bases for its all-important role in the historic eruption of God's saving plan for humanity. The human scandal of God's way does not begin with the cross, but with the historico-cultural incarnation of his Son in Galilee." Indeed, the divine preference for Galilee evidences a larger element in the character of God. It is not just a singular choice; it is God's way—the divine *modus operandi*.

Elizondo sees this *modus operandi* in the New Testament and labels it "the Galilee principle." He succinctly summarizes this principle: "what human beings reject, God chooses as his very own."<sup>7</sup> The gospel of Mark most notably emphasizes Galilee as

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 50-53.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 91.



more than just *Jesús'* region of origin. As Elizondo points out, Galilee is now recognized as a “major theological motif” in Mark’s gospel.<sup>8</sup> In fact, much of Mark’s narrative concerning *Jesús'* teachings and major events are related in reference to Galilee. *Jesús* comes up from Galilee, journeys with his disciples from Galilee to Jerusalem, then upon his salvific victory returns to where they first began. The Galilee principle is not only a Markan literary motif. Elizondo sees the same characterization of God’s way in Paul’s letters as well. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul reminds the believers that though they are discounted by the high and mighty, they were uniquely chosen by God.

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” (1 Cor. 1:26-31)

Of course, God did not just choose to use the foolish to shame the wise, God chose to *become* the foolish. “In becoming a Galilean, God becomes the fool of the world for the sake of the world’s salvation.”<sup>9</sup> For Elizondo, this is what defines *Jesús*. *Jesús* is a Galilean. He is *mestizo*. He is counted among the rejected, the insignificant, the colonized. He is considered an alien to both Rome and Jerusalem. He is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to the Greeks (1 Cor. 1:23). And he is God incarnate—not in spite of all these disqualifiers, but precisely because of them.

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 50. Elizondo references E. Lohmeyer (*Galilee und Jerusalem*, 1936), R.H. Lightfoot (*Locality and Doctrine in the Gospel*, 1938), and W. Marxsen (*Der Evangelist Markus: Studien zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Evangeliums*, 1956).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 53.

Elizondo paints the portrait of *Jesús* the Galilean in order to empower Mexican-Americans to take up their *mestizaje* as a blessing and to assure them of their election to mission. Elizondo is clear that the preferential option made for the oppressed is not simply to comfort them in their suffering, nor to place them atop the power structures of the day to rule over their oppressors. Rather, God chooses what the world rejects in order that those rejects might lead the way toward the salvific new creation. “God chooses an oppressed people, not to bring them comfort in their oppression, but to enable them to confront, transcend, and transform whatever in the oppressor society diminishes and destroys the fundamental dignity of human nature.”<sup>10</sup> This is what Elizondo terms the “Jerusalem principle.” In *Jesús*’ journey from Galilee to Jerusalem—from the margin of society to the center of it—Elizondo sees a model for Mexican-Americans and other *mestizo* groups today.

*Jesús* the Galilean still leads that journey and calls other *mestizos* to follow him. This is what makes Elizondo’s Christology so powerful. He reads his people into the gospel narratives where they find themselves side by side with *Jesús* the Galilean. This newfound nearness to *Jesús* brings about the identity and missional empowerment that Elizondo seeks to instill in his fellow *mestizos*. Michael E. Lee describes well the intentional intersectionality of Elizondo’s work:

Elizondo’s provocative image of [*Jesús*] the Galilean as a “borderland reject” correlates (1) the Christian confession of Jesus Christ as a fully human being—incarnated in the specific body, time, place, and culture of a first-century Galilean; (2) the biblical account of Jesus’ ministry occurring primarily in the

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 103.

marginal area of Galilee; and (3) the Mexican-American experience of borderland marginalization.<sup>11</sup>

These three cross-sections evidence Elizondo's careful method of seeing and judging. First seeing his people's experience of marginalization, Elizondo then moves to discover with whom his people might correlate in Scripture. As he looks upon the person of *Jesús* affirmed by Christian tradition, he then judges that *mestizo* people like himself hold much in common with *Jesús* the Galilean as the gospels describe him. This is precisely what "reading the Bible in Spanish"<sup>12</sup> looks like. Experience colors Elizondo's reading of Scripture, allowing him to find correspondence between the *mestizo* identity of Mexican-Americans and *Jesús*' Galilean identity. In turn, Scripture animates the lives of *mestizo* readers through Elizondo's interpretation and theological construction of *Jesús* the Galilean. As will be seen below, Elizondo's work proved fruitful in inspiring other Latinos/as to find *Jesús* in their own experiences of *mestizaje*.

#### Luis Pedraja: *Jesús* the Verb Made Flesh

John 1:1 reads, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." At least, that is what it says in English. In virtually all Spanish translations today, the Greek *logos* (Word) is translated as *Verbo* (Verb), rendering the reading: "In the beginning was the Verb."<sup>13</sup> Luis Pedraja contends that this conveys

---

<sup>11</sup> Michael Edward Lee, "The Galilean Jesus as Faithful Dissenter: Latino/a Christology and the Dynamics of Exclusion," in *Jesus in the Hispanic Community: Images of Christ from Theology to Popular Religion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 21.

<sup>12</sup> Justo L. González, "Reading the Bible in Spanish," in *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 75-87.

<sup>13</sup> Luis G. Pedraja, "Doing Christology in Spanish," *Theology Today* 54, no. 4 (January 1998): 462, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004057369805400402>. Pedraja gives a brief history of this translation. The earliest Spanish translations (Reina [1569] and Valera [1600]) of the Bible translated *logos* as *Palabra* (Word), but when Felipe Scio de San Miguel translated the Vulgate, he selected *Verbo* in order to remain

something that the English does not. Western theological and philosophical language has typically used static and abstract terms to define God. This is not inherently wrong, but over time it has reduced our concepts and categories for understanding God in such a way that curbs our imagination of God's activity in the world.<sup>14</sup> The Spanish translation, however, aids the reader in imagining the incarnation as a dynamic, expressive act of God rather than as a static disclosure of wisdom or truth. The incarnation, Pedraja says, is not something to be *believed* but something to be *lived*.<sup>15</sup> It is a historical fact, yes, but it is also an enlivening initiative that spurs us to new life and new action.

Like Elizondo, Pedraja recognizes the incarnation as essential to Christology and to Christian life as a whole. Had God not become human, we would be greatly hindered in our ability to understand God's love for us and to trust that God knows the depths of human sufferings.<sup>16</sup> Because God came, and even more because of where and how God came, it is possible to know and be known by God. This is why Latinos/as find the incarnation so significant. Pedraja writes, "Hispanics identify deeply with [*Jesús*], not because of his divinity, but because of his humanity."<sup>17</sup> It is in *Jesús*' sharing of human experiences, emotions, and, particularly, sufferings that Latinos/as find resonance with the God who loves.

---

true to the Latin *Verbum* and to ensure a distinction between God the Son and the written word of God. Most Spanish translations to follow favored San Miguel's translation.

<sup>14</sup> Luis G. Pedraja, *Jesus Is My Uncle: Christology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 87.

<sup>15</sup> Pedraja, "Doing Christology in Spanish," 462-463.

<sup>16</sup> Pedraja, *Jesus Is My Uncle*, 61.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

Pedraja points out that Hispanic<sup>18</sup> portrayals of the crucifixion are often more graphic and gory than other cultural depictions.<sup>19</sup> This is not because of some obsession with the gruesome. Nor does it represent an undervaluing of Christ's resurrection.<sup>20</sup> Rather, Hispanic people have a reverence for *Jesús*' moment of suffering because they themselves understand affliction, agony, and sorrow. Pedraja explains,

[Hispanic] people are drawn to the feet of the crucified [*Jesús*] not because of a sick fascination with death and suffering but because they can identify with the suffering and death experienced by Christ. At the feet of [*Jesús*] they feel the hope of faith in a God who understands suffering and abandonment. In such a God they can trust. . . . The people who worship at the feet of the dead [*Jesús*] are not worshipping an impotent and vanquished God, but one who lives and knows their struggles and suffering.<sup>21</sup>

However, Hispanics' identification with *Jesús*' suffering does not serve to simply numb their pain as they continue to suffer in their own lives. When they cast their eyes on the dying *Jesús*, Hispanics do not glorify the suffering in any way. Instead, they glorify the God who struggles through that suffering in order to bring about life.<sup>22</sup> They do not walk away from that image feeling a call to continue submitting to the forces that oppress them, but rather they leave knowing that God understands their pain and will ultimately

---

<sup>18</sup> I will be using the term "Hispanic" for much of this section in order to remain true to Pedraja's work. Based on Pedraja's usage of "Hispanic" throughout his work, I cannot presume that he is only speaking about Latinos/as. "Hispanic" is a broader term including those who descend from Spanish-influenced areas of the world beyond Latin America. See my definitions in the key terms listed in the Introduction.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 66. Pedraja states that there is in fact a general difference in emphases between Hispanic Protestants and Hispanic Catholics. Catholics, he says, place a greater emphasis on the passion while Protestants generally emphasize the resurrection. That said, neither tradition dismisses either occurrence. Both traditions recognize and celebrate the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as holy moments in Christ's act of salvation.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 68.

overcome it on their behalf. They know this because the God writhing upon the cross is the God of life, not death.<sup>23</sup>

In line with his assertion that *Jesús* is the incarnate *Verbo* of God, Pedraja understands the incarnation as an ongoing act of God. Of course, he is not suggesting that God has incarnated in other bodies in the same way that God was present in the person of *Jesús*. However, he argues that God is incarnate in every moment of suffering as well as in every act of love for those who suffer. In the first, God incarnates as the object of infliction; in the latter, God incarnates as the subject of life-giving love. “In those who suffer and struggle for life, God is present as an object of history, as one who experienced human sin and oppression. In those who act out of love for others, in those who struggle for life, we see God as a historical subject, acting on behalf of others and as the creator and giver of life.”<sup>24</sup> The incarnation is not just something to believe, but something to live. It is lived by Latinos/as and others when they suffer, and it is lived by all believers when they tend to the pains of the suffering.

In Luis Pedraja’s work, we see the fruition of a Spanish reading of Scripture and theology—this time, in literal terms. Pedraja uses the Spanish language to uncover the point at which a Hispanic worldview intersects with the divine incarnation. The *Jesús* that emerges from his reading is a Christ who shares in the suffering of Hispanics. This *Jesús* is the *Verbo* of God made flesh. In him, Hispanics see the full love of God that goes so far as to endure the same pain which afflicts them. This *Jesús* fully understands the depths of their anguish and gives them hope that life will prevail over death. This *Jesús*’

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

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

concern is not merely for their spiritual redemption, but for their physical liberation from poverty, sickness, hunger, and alienation.

Loida Martell-Otero: *Jesús Sato*

Loida Martell-Otero is a *Latina evangélica*—a Latina Protestant woman<sup>25</sup>—who, like Elizondo and Pedraja, puts forward a *Jesús* who occupies a very specific social location in his world. That social location, Martell-Otero suggests, is not irrelevant but is in fact right where salvation begins. Bringing together Elizondo's emphasis on *Jesús'* *mestizaje* along with the missional periphery emphasized by Orlando Costas<sup>26</sup> (a Puerto Rican missiologist), Martell-Otero describes *Jesús* as *un sato*. In Puerto Rico, to call someone “*sato*” or “*sata*” is to call them a mutt, mongrel, or someone of questionable character.<sup>27</sup> Martell-Otero further explains the nature of the term:

“*Qué sato!*” is spit out almost like an epithet, just as today many in the dominant society spit out the word “illegal immigrant,” or “Dominican,” or “Puerto Rican,” as if they were curse words. *Satos/as* are mixed breeds who are not perceived to be beautiful or of pleasing aspect. They are unwanted. They seem to lurk from the peripheral edges of polite society. People shoo them away. Stones are thrown at them. Shelters teem with them. *Satos/as* are the rejected ones in Puerto Rican society.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Loida I. Martell-Otero, “Encuentra Con El Jesús Sato: An Evangélica Soter-Ology,” in *Jesus in the Hispanic Community: Images of Christ from Theology to Popular Religion*, eds. Harold J. Recinos and Hugo Magallanes (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 74. Martell-Otero uses the term “*evangélica*” to refer to “the popular Protestantism that arose from the historic encounter of various Western Protestant groups with the *mestizo* popular Catholicism, which in turn is part of the fabric of Latin American culture and belief.” She adds, “*Evangélica* does not denote U.S. evangelicalism, with its attendant theological and political connotations, although some *evangélicos/as* find points of theological commonalities with it.”

<sup>26</sup> See Orlando E. Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2005).

<sup>27</sup> Martell-Otero, “Encuentra con el Jesús Sato,” 77.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

Why use such an insulting term for *Jesús*? Because both the *Jesús* described in Scripture and Latinas today share the status of *sato* and *satas*.

Latinas live in the periphery, says Martell-Otero. Decent food, education, housing, and other necessities are often out of reach for many Latinas.<sup>29</sup> Latinas are often nameless, voiceless, and exploited. They know what it is like to be labelled and treated as *satas*. “Many Latinas, particularly immigrant and poor women residing in the U.S. understand this experience having been called ‘spics,’ ‘illegals,’ and ‘wetbacks.’”<sup>30</sup> They “face the quadruple oppression of color, class, culture, and gender.”<sup>31</sup> Poor brown women are not the preferential option of our society.

Similarly, *Jesús* did not occupy the preferred social rung of his day. Though he did have the social advantage of being male, he would certainly have earned the title *sato* for other reasons. His *mestizo*-ness, his Galilean identity, and perhaps even more so, his questionable paternal legitimacy placed *Jesús* among the *satos/as*—“outside the gate.”<sup>32</sup> “To speak of the *Jesús sato*,” says Martell-Otero, “is to speak of [*Jesús*]’ nonidealized, concretely historical, peripherally placed, *mestizo*, struggling, seeking, hoping human being-ness.”<sup>33</sup> Martell-Otero is fully aware that this is not how Jesus is typically

---

<sup>29</sup> Loida I. Martell-Otero, “From Satas to Santas: Sobrajas No More: Salvation in the Spaces of the Everyday,” in *Latinas Evangélicas: A Theological Survey from the Margins*, by Loida I. Martell-Otero, Zaida Maldonado Pérez, and Elizabeth Conde-Frazier (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 36. The difficulties facing Latinas that Martell-Otero describes are not just assumptions or stereotypes. She relates them from the experiences shared by women in her church: “Women in my congregation have shared how they sought to shield their babies from rats in dilapidated buildings, or how they have covered up broken windows with cardboard in the dead of winter, fearing for the health of their children. Many deal with domestic as well as institutional violence. Adequate medical care is often beyond reach. Life is a perennial struggle. They struggle not just for themselves, but also for their families and communities.”

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Martell-Otero, “Encuentra con el Jesús Sato,” 83.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 77-78.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 77.



portrayed in western christologies. By emphasizing *Jesús'* humanity and the social pressures surrounding him, Martell-Otero is not downplaying his divinity in any way. Rather, she is making it even clearer where and among whom the divine joined humanity. It was not among the learned, the wealthy, the powerful, or even the respectable. No, *Jesús* showed up with the *satos* and *satas*. He showed up with the stooped woman whom he healed (Lk. 13:10-17), he showed up with the Samaritan woman at the well whom he honored (Jn. 4:4-42), and he shows up with Latinas to whom he brings the saving presence of God.<sup>34</sup>

For *Latina evangélicas*, the presence and nearness of *Jesús sato* are what saves, not his appeasement of a wrathful God. *Jesús sato* is “the embodied evidence that God knows them and loves them, because like them God in Jesús has experienced and confronted the sinful structures of the world. They recognize that through Jesús, God understands what it means to be wounded and to suffer.”<sup>35</sup> Latinas sing *coritos* of thanksgiving because they know *Jesús sato* has shared their struggles. They give *testimonios* because they can affirm that *Jesús sato* still remains among the *satos/as* of the world.<sup>36</sup> They praise him because through *Jesús sato*, they are transformed from *satas* to *santas* (saints). Just as *Jesús* shares in their sufferings, Latinas correspondingly share in his rising. “The resurrection is God’s no to the [*satos/as*] of the world being rejected. . . . The resurrection of *Jesús sato* is evidence of the faithfulness of God, who sends the Spirit to bring life, and life abundant. The resurrection is evidence that in the eyes of

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 79-82. Martell-Otero exegetes both of these texts.

<sup>35</sup> Martell-Otero, “From Satas to Santas,” 38.

<sup>36</sup> Martell-Otero, “Encuentra con el Jesús Sato,” 84-85.

God, those whom the world rejects as [*satos/as*], God considers [*santos/as*] (saints).”<sup>37</sup>

Through *Jesús sato*, Latinas receive honor and life. Though they are not the preferential option of society, they are the preferential option of God.

Loida Martell-Otero’s *Jesús sato* sees, understands, shares, and overcomes the oppression and daily struggles that Latinas face. He can do all of this, because he himself is *un sato*. Martell-Otero’s Christology is one of empowerment and resistance. In locating *Jesús*—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob made flesh—among the *satos/as* of the world, Martell-Otero restores honor to Latinas and others who have been overlooked, oppressed, and dehumanized. Not only did *Jesús* live as one of them, he triumphed over all powers that misname his *santos/as* as *satos/as*. Martell-Otero’s empowerment of Latinas is possible because she begins with their experiences as *satas*. Beginning there allows her to find commonalities between their lives and *Jesús*’ life. It lets her move behind the philosophical and theological language that has historically been used to discuss Christ to instead see *Jesús* as his community and peers (foes included) may have seen him. Again, this is not insignificant. It makes *Jesús* real, human, and relatable for Latinas while also revealing truths of Scripture that are often overlooked by white readers.

Martell-Otero also shows that Christology is not simply another chapter heading in a systematic theology. Christology is tied to soteriology, and soteriology matters immensely. Latina women do not need a doctrine of Christ’s preexistence, a logical explanation of *Jesús*’ full divinity and humanity, or a step-by-step atonement theory.

---

<sup>37</sup> Martell-Otero, “From Satas to Santas,” 38.

What they need is to know that, through *Jesús*, God understands the depths of their sufferings and has overcome the forces that stand against them. That is what saves and sustains them.

#### Miguel De La Torre: *Jesús* the Liberator

In his work, *The Politics of Jesús: A Hispanic Political Theology*, Miguel De La Torre draws a very clear and very bold line between the *Jesús* of Latino/a theology and the Jesus that has been used by the West as a tool of colonization and economic oppression. Bringing together the contributions of his *hermanas* and *hermanos*, De La Torre firmly locates *Jesús* among the colonized who suffer under the sins of the colonizers. The experience of colonization is not unfamiliar to Latinos/as; they live in it every day. Hence, De La Torre constructs *Jesús* the Latino/a liberator in order to “begin the decolonization process” of Latino/a minds.<sup>38</sup> His goal is to show his fellow Latinos/as that *Jesús* is not unlike them. *Jesús* also struggled in a society ruled by a foreign power. “The radicalness of the Gospels, usually missed by those who are privileged by houses within the empire,” says De La Torre, “is that the Jesús narratives are anticolonial literature about a native resident displaced by the invading colonial power.”<sup>39</sup> From here, De La Torre puts forth a portrait of *Jesús* and a reading of Scripture that makes real the liberation of Latino/a minds and lives that *Jesús* brings.

He describes *Jesús* as “a colonized man,” “a migrant,” “one of the poor,” “from the barrio,” “among the alienated,” “*un ajiaco*,” and “*un bilingüe*,” among other

---

<sup>38</sup> Miguel A. De La Torre, *The Politics of Jesús: A Hispanic Political Theology* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 25.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

descriptors.<sup>40</sup> These descriptors are necessary in order that those who share such titles might realize their own value. The “evangelical goal” of *Jesús*’ liberative message is “not to convince nonbelievers to believe doctrinal tenets but to convince nonpersons of their personhood, their infinite worth because they, regardless of what the world tells them, are created in the very image of God (*imago Dei*).”<sup>41</sup> De La Torre wants Latinos/as to recognize that there was a colonizing power (Rome) and a colonized people (Israel) in *Jesús*’ day, just as there have been (and continue to be) colonizing powers and colonized peoples in the Americas. He wants Latinos/as to see who *Jesús* came as and who he came to liberate. He wants Latinos/as to see that it was those like them—the marginalized, colonized people—to whom the good news was announced, “not because they were holier, nor better people, but because God chooses sides. God makes a preferential option for those who exist under the weight of oppression.”<sup>42</sup> Based on this divine preference, De La Torre suggests that, should God incarnate again today, “God would incarnate Godself as an undocumented immigrant, for they are the ones who are hungry, thirsty, naked, foreign, sick, and, if caught crossing the border without authorization, in prison.”<sup>43</sup>

To imagine *Jesús* as an undocumented immigrant pits him against the ruling political and social forces in the United States. This is precisely the dichotomy that De La Torre is trying to convey. *Jesús* is not on the side of those with wealth, power, and privilege—even if those people are the best-intentioned religious folk around. *Jesús* sides

---

<sup>40</sup> These descriptors are all found as subtitle headings throughout *The Politics of Jesús*.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>42</sup> Miguel A. De La Torre, “Constructing a Cuban-Centric Christ,” in *Jesus in the Hispanic Community: Images of Christ from Theology to Popular Religion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 61-62.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

with the excluded, oppressed outsiders—those people upon whose backs the ruling neoliberal system is built. *Jesús* does not respect the ruling authorities. He comes to liberate the oppressed, not to sign on with Caesar’s empire. *Jesús* comes to *joder*—“to screw with”<sup>44</sup>—the reigning power arrangements. *Jesús* comes to upend the power structures, just as he upended the money changers’ tables in the temple courts, and he is not concerned with remaining inside the boundaries established by the empire to do so. *Jesús* will go to whatever lengths necessary to liberate his people.<sup>45</sup>

De La Torre’s *Jesús* is a revolutionary liberator. This *Jesús* rises with his fellow Latinos/as and empowers them to resist their colonization. He assures them of their identities as divine image bearers and calls them to obstruct the sinful structures that hold them down. De La Torre’s Christology is explicitly designed to identify *Jesús* with his Latino/a community and to serve as a tool of resistance and continual liberation.<sup>46</sup>

#### Jesus or *Jesús*?

These four portraits of *Jesús* all present him with their own nuances and distinctions. What they all have in common, though, is that they each arise from the lived experiences of Latinos and Latinas. Each theologian paints Christ, God incarnate, into the

---

<sup>44</sup> De La Torre, *The Politics of Jesús*, 160. This is De La Torre’s gracious translation of the verb *joder*. It is in no way a polite term, which is part of the reason for his usage of it. In Spanish it is a vulgarity. “To *joder* is a Spanish verb, a word one would never use in polite conversation. Although it is not the literal translation of a certain four-letter word beginning with the letter *F*, it is still considered somewhat vulgar because it basically means, ‘to screw with.’”

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 161. “If the goal of the politics of *Jesús* is to bring about change, then it is crucial to go beyond the rules created by the dominant culture, to move beyond what is expected, to push beyond their universalized experiences.” De La Torre does not rule out violence as a method of *Jesús el joderon*. (“*Jesús*” is not italicized in the original.) One need not agree with De La Torre on this point (I do not) in order to follow him in imagining *Jesús* as one who disrupts the power arrangements without concern for their supposed inviolability.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 7. “If Yoder could give us a pacifist Mennonite Jesus created in his own image, why then can I not provide us with a liberative Hispanic *Jesús* created in my and my community’s image?” (Italics not in the original.)

murals of their communities, and conversely, they also paint their communities into the gospel murals. While they may not all add the accent, the Christ they each describe is *Jesús*—the Latino/a savior. *Jesús* understands what it means to live a *mestizo* existence, to live as a reject, an alien, a *sato*, a real suffering human, because he himself has lived as one. God chose to take on the flesh of a Galilean because it is from the Galilees of the world that salvation comes. Those who the world has written off and rejected, God honors and elects to be the salvation-bearers in our sinful world.

The Latino *Jesús* makes this possible in a way that the white Jesus cannot. In order for Latinos/as to be liberated from the oppressive forces that lord over their lives, their savior cannot be one who is complicit with those forces of oppression. Throughout the centuries that have passed since Christ's life, death, and resurrection, his name has at times been shamefully used to stamp approval upon great atrocities in the name of expanded political dominion—the colonialization and exploitation of Latinos/as and their forebears included.<sup>47</sup> Beginning with the Constantinian shift,<sup>48</sup> the western church abandoned Jesus the Galilean in exchange for Jesus Augustus. Jesus Augustus cannot save Latinos/as because he has had a hand in their repression. It requires a Christ who has not been co-opted by the principalities and powers to liberate Latinos/as. This savior must come from outside the established order. This savior must rise alongside those who suffer

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 2. “One simply needs to think of the witch burnings, the Inquisition, the crusades, the conquistadores, or the militarism of *pax americana* for examples of a Jesus created by political leaders to justify repression and subjugation.”

<sup>48</sup> See John Howard Yoder, “The Meaning of the Constantinian Shift,” in *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution*, ed. Theodore J. Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 57–74.

at the hands of every Augustus, Pharaoh, conquistador, and commander in chief. Only *Jesús* can save Latinos/as because only *Jesús* has suffered as one of them.

But what about the Roman, the Egyptian, the Spaniard, and the American? What about the colonizers? What about the *gringos/as*? What about those of us who are not on the margins, but are in the center of society, standing to benefit from our neoliberal system? What does it mean for us that *Jesús* arrives with a preference for those outside the gate, not those inside of it? If *Jesús* has come for the powerless, and the white Jesus I once knew turns out to be a tool of the power-wielding empire, then to whom shall I turn for salvation? Am I left without a savior?

**SECTION II:**

**EXPLORING AN OPEN-BORDER CHRISTOLOGY**



### Chapter 3: An Open-Border Christological Model

We have now met *Jesús*. We have seen that, in his identification with the experiences and social positions of Latinos/as, God draws near to them, restores their honor, and liberates them. Though they exist outside the gate of privilege, power, and status, God makes a preferential option on their behalf. God becomes one of them. Contrary to how our society may label them, Latinos/as are in fact favored in the kingdom of God.

This type of theological insight is one that cannot arise from within the power centers of our world. It can only come from Galilee, from the margins, from the colonized. Such a Christology is one that resists the “static religion”<sup>1</sup> of empire which ensures Jesus is on the side of American interests and the status quo. We have put Jesus in the White House to prevent him from showing up in the streets, among the *barrios*, and at the border. Yet, those are precisely the places where *Jesús* shows up. Latino/a Christologies are not simply an attempt to make Jesus look more like Latinos/as. Rather, they are a theological counter-voice that draws our attention back to the gospel texts so that we might reassess our understandings of Christ.

In the previous two chapters, I have done little more than describe the Latino/a theological method and christological portraits. Now I would like to join the

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 28-29. Brueggemann says that Solomon constructed a “static religion” by putting the free God of Moses in service of the empire. Solomon arranged his kingdom in such a way that “God and his temple [became] part of the royal landscape, in which the sovereignty of God [was] fully subordinated to the purpose of the king. . . . Such an arrangement clearly serves two interlocking functions. On the one hand, it assures ready sanction to every notion of the king because there can be no transcendent resistance or protest. On the other hand, it gives the king a monopoly so that no marginal person may approach this God except on the king’s terms. There will be no disturbing cry against the king here.”

conversation. The only problem is that I am not a Latino. I do not have an immediate place at the table and, consequently, I can never enter the conversation as an insider. However, there is a wider theological conversation happening that may grant me entry into the dialogue. Postcolonialism, as a broader movement, gives room for both the colonized and the colonizers to do theology conjointly.<sup>2</sup> Thus, postcolonial theology can serve as an entryway for me and other white Americans to not only read *about* Latino/a theology but do theology *with* Latinos/as. We may not have a place at the table of Latino/a theology, but we do have a place at the table of postcolonial theology if we are willing to place our own power and privilege on the table to be discussed. The remainder of this thesis is my attempt to do theology alongside my Latino/a brothers and sisters, opening my borders to *Jesús* and placing everything on the table.

In this chapter, I propose that we open our theological gates to learn from the colonized. More specifically, I propose that we *gringo/a* Christians open our theological borders to encounter *Jesús*, for we just might find salvation in him. Below I will locate this proposal within the postcolonial conversation, put forward an open-border christological model, then describe three effects of an open-border Christology that make possible salvation in *Jesús* for white Americans.

---

<sup>2</sup> Not all postcolonial theorists would say so. Some would reserve the postcolonial conversation to only those who have been or have descended from the colonized. The Postcolonial Theological Roundtable is one example of a space in which both the colonizers and colonized are invited to do postcolonial theology together. The publication that emerged from that roundtable meeting (*Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations: Global Awakenings in Theology and Praxis*, 2014) has had a significant impact on my interest in postcolonial theology and on the direction of this thesis. Several of its contributors are referenced throughout this work.

### Joining the Postcolonial Conversation

Before white Americans can enter the postcolonial conversation, it is necessary to understand the context of this conversation. The numeric center of the church is no longer in the North and West, but in the South and East.<sup>3</sup> This means that those lands where white colonists exploited and extracted every possible mineral, commodity, and human resource are now bountifully producing Christian disciples, missionaries, and theology. The lands that were depleted by imperial greed now serve as the heartland of the global church.<sup>4</sup> This is, of course, both because of and in spite of the colonial missionary efforts. In many places of the colonized world, white European missionaries were the first to bring a gospel message, convert indigenous peoples to Christianity, and plant churches. No matter how pure their intentions, however, those trailblazing missionaries ultimately served as another arm of the ethnocentric, racializing, oppressive empires of Europe. Perhaps some of these missionaries were themselves exploited by the imperial powers that commissioned them, and their sincere efforts were manipulated into benefitting the colonizing scheme. In the worst cases, perhaps, these missionaries intended to use the gospel of Jesus to subdue, subjugate, and “civilize” indigenous populations for economic and political purposes. At the very least, Christian mission was carried out with an

---

<sup>3</sup> William A. Dyrness, *Learning about Theology from the Third World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 13. Dyrness offers the following statistics: “In 1900 ... Christians in Latin America, Africa, and Asia numbered a mere 86.7 million, compared to 333.2 million in Europe and North America. By 1988 Third World Christians numbered 826.6 million, compared to 594.7 in the West.”

<sup>4</sup> A.F. Walls, “Towards an Understanding of Africa’s Place in Christian History,” in *Religion in a Pluralistic Society*, ed. J.S. Pobee (Leiden: Brill), 180-189, quoted in Dyrness, 13. Walls wrote in 1976, “One of the most important ... events in the whole of Christian history, has occurred within the lifetime of people not yet old. It has not reached the textbooks, and most Christians, including many of the best informed, do not know it has happened. It is nothing less than a complete change in the centre of gravity of Christianity, so that the heartlands of the Church are no longer in Europe, decreasingly in North America, but in Latin America, in certain parts of Asia, and ... in Africa.”

inherent sense of superiority. Willie Jennings writes, “It is as though Christianity, wherever it went in the modern colonies, inverted its sense of hospitality. It claimed to be the host, the owner of the spaces it entered, and demanded native peoples enter its cultural logics, its way of being in the world, and its conceptualities.”<sup>5</sup> Christianity was one of the primary tools used to achieve this totalizing colonization. Today, however, those who were colonized now wield the tool that was once used to “civilize” them. They have taken the Christianity that was at times weaponized against them and have turned it into a plowshare, cultivating rich traditions and theologies that further the liberation of their people from all forces of colonization. Whether it be black theology, womanist theology, indigenous theology, Dalit theology, Latino/a theology, or any number of postcolonial theologies, these voices are helping their people heal from the abuses of the Christian tradition that were used to subdue them and their land.

These postcolonial theologies, which deconstruct the colonized gospel and theology by which white European and American churches preach and live, have much to offer the church at large. In fact, listening to, learning from, and partnering with these theological voices may be the only way forward for the declining church of the West. “The Christian faith of the future,” says Brian McLaren, “must be a joint enterprise in which the descendants of the colonized and the descendants of the colonizers come together, reflect on the past and imagine a different and better future together.”<sup>6</sup> To do so,

---

<sup>5</sup> Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 8.

<sup>6</sup> Brian McLaren, “Why Postcolonial Conversations Matter: Reflections on Postcolonial Friendship,” in *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations: Global Awakenings in Theology and Praxis*, eds. Kay Higuera Smith, Jayachitra Lalitha, and Daniel L. Hawk (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 15.

we who descend from the colonizers must be willing to assume a learning posture—something that does not come easily to a people who have historically been the ones in control of the ruling pedagogy. Virgilio Elizondo reminds us that we must move beyond an us-versus-them mentality, toward a focus on new creation. This will require honest self-awareness for all parties. Elizondo says,

it is the traditionally dominant group that will have to have the greater humility to face itself openly and admit that it has much to receive, much to learn, from the groups it has previously considered inferior. There is no question of one group “winning” over the other, but of all groups being willing to die a bit to their own egotism and ethnocentrism for the sake of the new creation.<sup>7</sup>

William Dyrness adds that “if theology is to be rooted in the actual lives of Christians today, increasingly it will have to be from the poor to the poor, in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. And theology done in the West, if it is not to become increasingly provincial ... will have to be done in dialogue with the theological leaders in the Third World.”<sup>8</sup>

Though the theological voices of the colonized have come “from the margins,” they are anything but marginal. No longer can we label these voices as “contextual” theologies. They are nothing short of Christian theology—no qualifiers.<sup>9</sup> It would be utterly foolish for the church of the West—and white Christians in particular—to ignore the voices of our brothers and sisters all around us. Those who are doing theology from the margins see what we, who live in the sociopolitical center, cannot see; those in Galilee know what we in Jerusalem and Rome do not know; those outside the gate are

---

<sup>7</sup> Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise*, Revised (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 27.

<sup>8</sup> Dyrness, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Gene L. Green, “A Response to the Postcolonial Roundtable: Promises, Problems and Prospects,” in *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations: Global Awakenings in Theology and Praxis*, eds. Kay Higuera Smith, Jayachitra Lalitha, and Daniel L. Hawk (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 22.

saying what we, who are inside the gate, have not imagined saying. It is time that we open our gates to learn from the voices of the colonized.

Latino/a theology represents one such voice. Or, more accurately, several theological voices come to us from our Latino brothers and Latina sisters. Collectively, though, they constitute a postcolonial perspective which intends to liberate Latinos/as from all forms of oppression. While the liberation of Latinos/as is certainly the first goal of postcolonial Latino/a theology, white American believers ought to also pay attention to their work. According to Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire, liberation necessarily includes the freeing of both the oppressed and oppressor.<sup>10</sup> This possibility of liberation for those of us who descend from the oppressors is precisely why we must be part of the postcolonial conversation. Just as the oppressed must reach a level of *conscientização*, or conscientization, about their state of oppression, we too must first become conscious of what exactly it is that binds us.<sup>11</sup> Our conscientization is dependent on that of our non-white, colonized sisters and brothers. As they break off the shackles from their own wrists, they will be free to point out our own shackles to which we have hitherto been blind.

---

<sup>10</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos, 30th Anniversary Edition (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 28. “This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well.”

<sup>11</sup> Gilberto Lozano and Federico A. Roth, “The Problem and Promise of Praxis in Postcolonial Criticism,” in *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations: Global Awakenings in Theology and Praxis*, eds. Kay Higuera Smith, Jayachitra Lalitha, and Daniel L. Hawk (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 191. *Conscientização* is the Portuguese term Freire uses. *Conscientization* is the English transliteration which Gilberto Lozano and Federico A. Roth define as “the awareness that is gained when the oppressed are able to name the things that oppress them and to uncover the mechanisms by which they are in situations of subjugation.” I am suggesting that the oppressors too need this conscientization if they are to find liberation alongside the oppressed.

Latino/a Christology is one example of liberating conscientization. In examining and deconstructing the white Jesus promulgated by their colonizers, Latinos/as have become conscious of the ways in which this Jesus has been used to exclude and suppress them as a people. With this conscious act of deconstruction, Latinos/as have also consciously constructed a Christology that returns Christ to his liberating character and purpose, making the good news truly good news for Latinos and Latinas. The gospel of *Jesús*, however, cannot only be for Latinos/as. For if the liberation of the oppressor is tied to the liberation of the oppressed, then white American Christians must also repent and believe the good news of *Jesús*.

#### An Open-Border Christology

Theologically speaking, *Jesús* remains outside the gate of white American theology. *Jesús*, the Latino/a Christ, is relegated to the corners of “contextual” theology and risks being viewed as little more than a novelty when the larger North American theological project is looked at as a whole. The relegation of *Jesús* to the periphery of theological circles mirrors the relegation of Latinos/as to the peripheries of our society. In marginalizing Latinos/as and *Jesús* with them, though, we push our savior farther away, repeating the errors of Rome and Jerusalem when they rejected *Jesús* and his following of Galileans. If white Americans are to find salvation today, then we must open our borders to *Jesús* and humbly follow the one who is both Other and Savior. Indeed, it is only one who is Other who can save us from the empire that we ourselves have created.

In the previous chapter we saw that the Jesus of white American and European Christologies is incapable of saving Latinos/as because that Jesus played a part in their suppression. The same proves true for those of us who are white Americans, those who

descend from the colonizers. While the Jesus in discussion is in fact “our” Jesus, we too have been misled by this Christology. The principalities and powers have seen the threat that Christ poses to their empire and have therefore made efforts to rein in the one who jeopardizes their rule. They have sequestered Christian theology and have revised it to include themselves and their interests, making the gospel of Christ almost indistinguishable from the gospel of America. The *Jesús* in Scripture is the champion of the poor, outcast, and sinner; the Jesus of America is the champion of capitalism, democracy, and American exceptionalism. Many of us have bought this counterfeit Jesus, not knowing its inconsistencies. Really, we can only know that the imperial Jesus is not the Christ of Scripture if someone outside the inner circle of American privilege and power makes us aware of our errors and presents an alternative vision of Christ. Otherwise, we might mistake Jesus Augustus for the carpenter from Galilee—Maria’s son. In painting the portrait of *Jesús*, Latino/a theologians have constructed the contrast-image necessary to illuminate the ineptitudes of the Jesus co-opted by the powers of Empire. When Latinos/as encounter *Jesús* as presented by Latino/a theologians, they recognize him as one of their own and can therefore find salvation in him. When white Americans encounter *Jesús*, they recognize him as foreign, as contextual, as Other, and—as I am arguing—can therefore find salvation in him.

*Jesús* must first be known to us as Other before he can be known to us as Savior. This is because the salvation we require is freedom from the dehumanizing systems of empire which push us to exclude, subdue, and alienate fellow image-bearers for the sake of expanded political and economic domain. A Jesus who is complicit in the colonizing mechanism of empire cannot save us from that very cog which turns and crushes those



who stand in its way. A Jesus whose name has been used to sign on to the colonization of the “New World,” the Atlantic slave trade, the creation and exploitation of banana republics, and the exclusionary and exploitative immigration policies of the U.S. cannot save us from Empire because that Jesus is Empire. We need a different Jesus to save us. We need a Jesus that does not come from Washington. We need a Jesus who comes to us from the margins—from the borderlands—of society, rather than from the center of power, for only one outside the power structure can see that it is an unstable one and beckon us out.

*Jesús* the Galilean, then, is not irrelevant to those in Rome or Jerusalem. Virgilio Elizondo argues that *Jesús* did not journey to Jerusalem because it was the grandest stage on which to enact salvation, but because “it was the center of the powers that excluded and oppressed the masses. . . . Jerusalem stands as the symbol of absolutized power that cloaks the crimes of the powerful in multiple ways—and worst of all, it does it in the name of God! . . . The Galilean *has* to go to Jerusalem.”<sup>12</sup> Elizondo also puts forward his “Jerusalem principle” which posits that “God chooses an oppressed people, not to bring them comfort in their oppression, but to enable them to confront, transcend, and transform whatever in the oppressor society diminishes and destroys the fundamental dignity of human nature.”<sup>13</sup> As *Jesús* walks the *camino* from Galilee to Jerusalem, a crowd of Galileans accompany him for that is the mission to which *Jesús* has called them. When *Jesús* liberates Latinos/as, he does so in order to free them for the mission to Jerusalem so that salvation may be extended to their oppressors as well. When they

---

<sup>12</sup> Elizondo, 68. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

march on Jerusalem, it is not because they intend to destroy it, but because they are the only ones who can reveal to those with power that they are in need of liberation and that Jesús has brought it. Elizondo makes clear that, though they may be unaware, those who wield power and privilege have a dependency on the powerless:

Those in power are themselves powerless to bring about their own liberation. The power of the world corrupts and—worse yet—blinds those within the power system to the correlative force of their own power. They are not aware that they are enslaved and hence they seek only maintenance of the status quo, not liberation. Only powerlessness can liberate abusive power.<sup>14</sup>

It is only those who have not known power who can see the shackles on the wrists of the powerful: “Those who have not had false gods to trust in will be freer to recognize the absolutes of the system as false gods. They who are aware of their poverty can better recognize that it is the life-giving Father who alone gives true life.”<sup>15</sup> In Elizondo’s arrangement, we who are white Americans live our lives in Jerusalem, blind to our captivity in the system which our ancestors have built and which we have inherited. Latinos/as exist in Galilee but come to the power centers to faithfully pronounce that *Jesús* has come to set the captives free and, as it turns out, we are the captives.

This is not an abstract arrangement. It is an accurate representation of the interaction between postcolonial theologies and white western theologies. In their writing, preaching, and praxis, Latino/a theologians have accompanied *Jesús* to Jerusalem, shouting, “Hosanna! Save!” It is now up to us to decide whether we will let *Jesús* in to receive his salvation or shut him out and maintain the wall of separation between us. If we believe that salvation can only come from one who is Other, then we

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

must open our theological borders to *Jesús* and allow him entrance without any expectation of assimilation. That is, we must accept *Jesús* on his own terms and resist our defensive instinct of vetting him to determine if he is academic enough to fit into the white western theological project, safe enough to protect the complacency of white American Christians, and otherworldly enough to leave the political order of society unquestioned. *Jesús* is not just the savior of Latinos/as; he is our savior as well because he, out of his otherness, makes possible a salvific new creation if we would only grant him entry.

### Soteriological Effects of an Open-Border Christology

The *camino* from an open-border Christology to salvific new creation moves through three natural effects that metaphorically mirror the sociopolitical effects of opened borders: (1) identities will flare, (2) cultures will mix, and (3) new creation will be birthed. Each one of these phenomena is a necessary step that persons of privilege and power must traverse if they are to find salvation in *Jesús*.

#### *Identities Flare*

When geopolitical borders are opened, certain fears become elevated. Who will come through the border? What will they be like? Will they be safe? Are they going to take over our country? Will our lives ever be the same? Questions that often begin by asking “Who are they?” quickly turn to questions of “Who are we?” When the possibility arises that someone new, someone different, someone other may enter our claimed space, we begin to feel the need to quickly define and defend who we are and what we stand for. Flags fly higher, anthems ring louder, walls are built, and we brace ourselves to stand against the oncoming invasion of those who threaten our identity and way of life. The

same types of fear, insecurity, and defensiveness come out when we open our theological borders to *Jesús*.

This process of identity intensification is not wholly unnatural nor necessarily corrupt. In fact, maintenance of differences is an integral part of understanding one's identity. In order to be oneself, there must be some other from whom to differ but without whom one cannot exist. Miroslav Volf explains it this way: "Identity is a result of the distinction from the other *and* the internalization of the relationship to the other; it arises out of the complex history of 'differentiation' in which both the self and the other take part by negotiating their identities in interaction with one another."<sup>16</sup> The act of differentiation, Volf argues, is not problematic. Differentiation is simply the necessary creative act of bringing order to chaos, "separating-and-binding," as seen in the Genesis 1 creation narrative.<sup>17</sup> While differentiation is a natural and necessary identity-formation process which involves both separating and binding, *exclusion* is what happens when only separation or only binding is carried out. Exclusion, says Volf, is indeed problematic. Exclusion can either take the form of total separation in which one "[takes] oneself out of the pattern of interdependence and [places] oneself in a position of sovereign independence," or it can take the form of total binding in which the mutually necessary separation between oneself and the other is erased so that the other "emerges as an inferior being who must either be assimilated by being made like the self or be subjugated to the self."<sup>18</sup> In both cases, whether total separation or total binding, the

---

<sup>16</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 66. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

balance of interdependence is offset by the weight of exclusionary actions that “prevent a creative encounter with the other.”<sup>19</sup>

Up to this point, I have used language of “open borders” and “granting entrance” to describe what happens when white Americans encounter the *Jesús* of Latino/a Christologies. One may now ask whether opening borders of any kind is not a violation of the order brought about by “separating and binding.” Are not open borders a move from order to chaos—a reversal of God’s creative act at creation? This is a valid question, for even Volf says that “boundaries are part of the creative process of differentiation. For without boundaries there would be no discrete identities, and without discrete identities there could be no relation to the other.”<sup>20</sup> Borders, then, are not the problem at hand. The fact that there exist theological (and geopolitical) borders is simply a reflection of the differences that make possible intercontextual and dialogical exchanges. There is still a problem at hand, however. The problem is not that borders exist, but that those borders so easily become walls of exclusion. Boundaries are not exclusionary in and of themselves, says Volf, “what is exclusionary are the impenetrable barriers that prevent a creative encounter with the other.”<sup>21</sup> In the context of our christological conversation, I am suggesting that when we open our theological borders to *Jesús*, our identities flare in reaction to the intrusion of a foreign other, thereby illuminating what these “impenetrable barriers” truly are and making it possible for those barriers to be overcome.

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Flags, anthems, and borders may be natural products of the differentiation process, but when flags accompany weapons and anthems turn into chants and borders become frontlines, then our act of differentiation has morphed into an act of exclusion—and exclusion is not a natural occurrence but a coerced one. To commit this sin of exclusion, argues Volf, “is not simply to make a wrong choice, but to succumb to an evil power.”<sup>22</sup> When our identities flare at the threat of others’ intrusion into our lives, light is thrown upon the coercing powers that compel us to exclude. Nationalism, racism, ethnocentrism, greed, supremacy, fear—these are some of the modes in which the powers of evil coerce us into excluding the Other. These demons possess our political and social structures and convince us that excluding the Other is not only justifiable, but proper and good. Volf paints this picture as a “bellicose musical,” describing each performer’s contribution:

“Historians”—national, communal, or personal interpreters of the past—trumpet the double theme of the former glory and past victimization; “economists” join in with the accounts of present exploitation and great economic potentials; “political scientists” add the theme of the growing imbalance of power, of steadily giving ground, of losing control over what is rightfully ours; “cultural anthropologists” bring in the dangers of the loss of identity and extol the singular value of our personal or cultural gifts, capable of genuinely enriching the outside world; “politicians” pick up all four themes and weave them into a high-pitched aria about the threats to vital interests posed by the other who is therefore the very incarnation of evil; finally the “priests” enter in a solemn procession and accompany all this with a soothing background chant that offers to any whose consciences may have been bothered the assurance that God is on our side and that our enemy is the enemy of God and therefore an adversary of everything that is true, good, and beautiful.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 88.

This orchestra is arranged and conducted by the powers of evil that seek to restore chaos to what God has created.

The irony of their tactic, though, is that they have performed this number before. With their grandest performance, they also orchestrated their own exposure and demise. In an attempt to rid the world of the God who created it, the powers coerced the religious and political leaders into playing a dirge for Christ. As *Jesús* stood before the Sanhedrin, endured a Roman flogging, then hung upon the tree, it became clear that neither the temple nor the Roman elites acted with divine authority for they had just nailed the divine to the cross. The temple curtain tore because God did not reside there; God resided upon the cross. If God was on the cross and did not reside in either temple or Praetorium, then some other powers must inhabit those spaces. The cross, therefore, draws our attention to the powers that controlled the religious and political leaders that Friday.

Those powers that orchestrated the exclusion of *Jesús* are the same powers that coerce us today. The *Jesús* they thought they had put away continues to undermine and expose their grip on us. When Latino/a theologians introduce white Americans to *Jesús*, our first response may be one of rejection. *Jesús* is not like us; *Jesús* is *their* Jesus; *Jesús* is foreign; *Jesús* is too political. As we push away *Jesús*, however, room is made for us to step back and reexamine why we cannot accept *Jesús*. Why do we fear him? What aspect of our lives feels threatened by his intrusion? Why do I feel the need to demarcate my Jesus from their *Jesús*? If we allow ourselves to honestly seek out the answers to these questions, we will find that we exclude *Jesús* because we have been duped into singing along to the “bellicose musical” which the powers of sin have directed for us. We reject *Jesús* because, if he is on the other side of the border, then he does not reside among us.

If Christ exists outside the gate, then who have we been worshipping inside the gate? Our unwillingness to face these realizations draws us back into the grip of our captors and we again condemn *Jesús* to exclusion. But once we have seen the face of *Jesús* on the other side of the barrier, we cannot forget him; a seed has been planted. We will always wonder whether the barrier between us is the security fence we have constructed or the bars of our own prison. Should we realize our captivity to the powers of exclusion and open our borders to *Jesús*, we may begin the uncomfortable movement toward freedom and new creation.

### *Cultures Mix*

Upon opening our borders to *Jesús*, he and his ways begin to transform the landscape of our lives. Just as border ports of entry become deltas of diffusion where the two sides blend and mix as they run into one another, so our theology begins to transform when we allow *Jesús* entry without an expectation of assimilation to our preexisting theological systems. After the arrival of *Jesús* is first felt as an intrusion (identities flare), his presence among us eventually moves toward inclusion—whether we resist it or not. The reality is that when two worlds collide, they inevitably mix at the border. This is not something to fear but is a necessary phenomenon that paves the way for new creation to be born.

If you were to drive through my hometown, which is situated in the Central Valley of California, you would see that some storefront signs are written in English, others are in Spanish, and still others feature both languages. If you were to turn on your radio, you would find the same situation: some English broadcasts, some Spanish, and some a combination of both. And if you wanted to stop for lunch in my town, you could



easily find a classic American burger and fries, a *carne asada burrito*, or just as easily, *asada* fries (think *nachos*, but with French fries instead of *tortilla* chips). This is because cultures do not simply coexist side-by-side when brought together; they intermingle, interact, and mix to produce something new.

What does this mean theologically? It means that when we are introduced to *Jesús* by our Latino brothers and Latina sisters, and choose to open the borders of our theological system to him, then not only does our Christology begin to alter, but other aspects of our theology change under the influence of *Jesús*. *Jesús* does not enter without an interest in our understandings of sin, salvation, Scripture, ecclesiology, praxis, etc. He comes as the teacher from Galilee, still transforming the lives of those who follow him and call him Lord. So just as my hometown has taken on a Spanglish, or a *mestizo*, quality, our theological landscapes can also be transformed when we open ourselves to embrace *Jesús*.

In fact, it is in this phenomenon of mixing wherein lies the problem which sparked this thesis project. As I read and interacted with Latino/a theologies, I initially pushed away *Jesús*, thinking him to be too “contextual” to matter to me, but eventually found myself convinced that those Latino/a theologians were correct—*Jesús* is a Galilean whose preference is not for me, but for those who are poor, hungry, ridiculed, and weeping. Of course, this realization created a crisis within me and my theological psyche. If *Jesús* and his kingdom are for others, then how can I follow *Jesús* without being one of those others? This question opened myself up to transformation. I became willing to embrace the transformation that would come through a mixing—a dialogue—between Latino/a theology and my own evangelical beliefs, and I accepted the position of a

learner. It is difficult, though, to enter a learning posture after standing on certainty for some time. It requires one to walk back from—to create a distance between—that which was once unquestionable to make room for something new to be planted. In this case, it meant creating a distance between myself and the Jesus of white American evangelicalism. I had to allow my Christology to take on a foreign hue and begin a new relationship with *Jesús*.

When borders open and cultures mix, the result is both a belonging and a foreignness for the involved peoples. For the migrating group, the foreignness is inherent to the new location and a sense of belonging must be created in order to survive. Hence, they adapt what they find to reflect what they know to be home. Conversely, the settled group already possesses belonging—they shaped the whole landscape and social structures to create that belonging. But when another people joins them and introduces new dynamics to their social space, the settled group begins to feel a foreignness within its own home. That felt foreignness can either fester mutual resentment and disdain, or it can give way to a dialogue between the two cultures. This is the inherent insecurity of intercultural interactions. Elizabeth Conde-Frazier says that

an encounter is where we risk. It is a place for the collision of two worlds—for the multiplicity of views. It is where various streams meet. It is the bringing together of a variety of sources that might not often be placed together. This is the borderland. In these spaces, hybrid significations are created, requiring the practice of cultural translations and negotiations. It is here that we transcend dualistic modes of thinking and come to understand how opposing ideas can interact with one another. This place is called *mestizo/a* consciousness.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, “From Hospitality to Shalom,” in *A Many Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation*, by Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, S. Steve Kang, and Gary A. Parrett (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 176.

A *mestizo/a* consciousness is a place of ambiguity in which two realities, as disparate as they may appear, are creatively held in the tension of one complete whole. Conde-Frazier points to Moses' life as an example of this:

When Moses was living in the desert, many people were living as slaves in Egypt. When God revealed their reality to Moses, Moses included their world in his world. ... This revelation or encounter showed him the connections between the everyday life of his neighbor (slavery) and his own life. Now, the historical events of his time, which had no meaning for him, entered into his world with new meanings. Moses was faced with pangs of conscience.<sup>25</sup>

When we welcome in *Jesús*, he brings with him a kingdom of the lowly, the poor, the oppressed, the hungry, and the foreign marching right behind him. If we want *Jesús*, then we must also accept that this is the kingdom we are now including in our world. To mix this reality with our own is to throw ourselves into the "pangs of conscience" from which we can never retreat. We will never rid our ears of *Jesús*' blessings and woes; we will never purge our eyes of seeing him dine with sinners; we will never forget the image of him hanging upon the Roman cross. These realities may be painful to bear as we realize that we white Americans only know this *Jesús* as outsiders, but we cannot undo our relationship with *Jesús* once we have opened ourselves to receive him. We can only weave together the reality of our power and privilege with the reality of *Jesús*' marginality and preference for the poor in order to create a new way forward which holds our two worlds in creative tension.

Of course, creative tension is not the only option. We could choose to reject *Jesús* and his kingdom because of his foreignness and the condemnation he levies against our status and pride. This would mirror the attempts being made (and those made in the past)

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 177.

by white Americans to rid the United States of Latino/a influence, to “make America great again.” There is a battle being waged over the narrative of America. Whose country is it and what does it stand for? Multiple narratives are warring with each other, attempting to eliminate the others. This is always the risk when worlds collide: they may either unite as a new, complex whole or the power-wielding one may attempt to destroy the other.

The entrance of *Jesús* and his kingdom into our theological psyche introduces a new narrative that could either be eliminated or incorporated. I am suggesting that we resist the urge to exclude what is other, embrace *Jesús*, and do the hard work of negotiating the *mestizo/a* consciousness that emerges. This negotiation work is a matter of storytelling. Conde-Frazier puts it this way: “When we encounter one another in a common space, we, with our differing stories, must create a shared story in which we all have a role.”<sup>26</sup> An open-border christological approach begins by allowing *Jesús* entry, but the work does not stop there. As *Jesús* challenges and changes the landscape of our theology, we must negotiate the story with him, making sense of these two realities at work within us: a privileged existence and a poor savior. A true embrace of *Jesús* will require us to “readjust our identities to make space for [him].”<sup>27</sup> We must be willing to reconsider who it is that we are in light of who it is we know *Jesús* to be. Out of the

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>27</sup> Volf, 29. In the original, Volf is not talking about embracing Christ, but embracing the human other. Embrace requires “the will to give ourselves to others and ‘welcome’ them, to readjust our identities to make space for them, is prior to any judgment about others, except that of identifying them in their humanity.”

mixing of realities comes a salvific new creation that begins with discovering a new identity in relation to *Jesús*.

### *New Creation*

The salvation *Jesús* offers for the privileged and powerful is to be found in the wilderness—in the borderland—outside of Egypt, Rome, Jerusalem, and Washington. Just as Moses was sent to rescue God's people out of Egypt, *Jesús* travels from Galilee to Jerusalem not to reform the power structures but to save his people out from under them and to offer an alternative kingdom. Embracing *Jesús* means opening oneself to the mixing of realities that produces a salvific new creation. It means accepting the transformation that must take place within oneself in order to die to the bondage of Empire and resurrect in the true humanity of the kingdom of *Jesús*. It means defecting from Egypt and joining the freed slaves as they traverse the *camino* into the wilderness where they will be formed into a new people. While *Jesús* first comes to set the oppressed free, he next invites their oppressors to have their sight restored that they might see those they had previously subjugated now as their brothers and sisters. Salvation is not just about the freeing of the individual, but the formation of a new people. Just as the mixing of two or more ethnic groups results in a new *mestizo/a* generation, so too the mixing that occurs when the kingdom of *Jesús* collides with the kingdom of our privilege and power gives way to the beauty that is the new creation. Through a process of defection, identification, and justification, persons of power and privilege may find new identities in the *familia* of *Jesús*.

Those of us who have made the choice to open our theological borders to *Jesús* do so believing that we are allowing *Jesús* to enter. This is not wrong—we are, after all,

making a choice to integrate a Latino/a Christology into our theological system—but something more is happening. When we open the gate to *Jesús*, he does not simply come in to stay; he comes in to lead us out. If in our initial reaction against *Jesús*, our identity flares to reveal the powers that bind us, then our entry into the borderland of *mestizo/a* consciousness where worlds and identities mix is a step away from our captors and toward salvation. By accepting *Jesús* we are also accepting that we cannot remain complicit in a system of exploitation. We cannot maintain our citizenship in the empire of exclusion while also seeking a citizenship in the kingdom of *Jesús*. If we wish to be free from the powers that demand our exclusion of the Galileans among us—the poor, the black, the brown, the alien—then we must defect to *Jesús*' kingdom which honors those very people that our empire rejects. This is what it means for us to bear our crosses. De La Torre puts it well: “For us to pick up our cross, deny ourselves—that is deny our status and station—then follow and die with *Jesús* so that we can also live with him means that we, too, must find solidarity with the world’s crucified people.”<sup>28</sup> There can be no life with *Jesús* without sharing in the lives of the excluded, because *Jesús* is himself one of the excluded. So, when we agree to open our borders to him, he comes in to beckon us out—out to the wilderness where his redeemed people live. He invites us to denounce the privilege and power that Empire has granted us, to crucify our power upon his cross, and to take up a redemptive powerlessness in order to join a new kind of humanity.

---

<sup>28</sup> Miguel A. De La Torre, *The Politics of Jesús: A Hispanic Political Theology* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 151.

The humanity that *Jesús* offers is made possible by his very participation in it. In his incarnation, *Jesús* intercepts the bipolar oppressed-oppressor segregation of human society and becomes the “third other who immediately opens new possibilities to bypass the normal acceptance-rejection dynamics of group or personal relationships.”<sup>29</sup> He offers himself as the third pole in an otherwise bipolar arrangement. By claiming to be the Lord of all, *Jesús* rearranges human relations to reflect every group’s equal dependence upon himself. Of course, those benefitting from the current bipolar arrangement will likely reject the “universal belonging” of *Jesús*, thereby excluding themselves from his *familia*,<sup>30</sup> but there will inevitably be some of us who wish to embrace this new way and shake off our title as “oppressors.” By the grace of *Jesús*, we too are welcome in the new human family.

Upon defecting to the kingdom of *Jesús*, those of us coming out of Empire venture into the borderlands without a clear identity. Like the “mixed multitude” (Exod. 12:38) that left Egypt with the Israelites, we leave behind our citizenship and documents when we walk outside the gate. We enter the borderlands undocumented. The beauty of the kingdom of *Jesús*, however, is that no documents are needed for acceptance. Moving forward, our identity is wrapped up in *Jesús*’ own identity. Having crucified the power and privilege that were so central to our identities in Empire, we now live by the resurrection power of *Jesús* and the privilege of the poor. Volf describes this process as a

---

<sup>29</sup> Elizondo, 63.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 64. “Those with a comfortable and well defined earthly existence will resist. The powerful, established, prestigious, and privileged will fight against the new way. One constant easily discovered in the gospels is that the wise and the powerful of this world will exclude themselves from the kingdom. They too are invited, but seldom accept (Luke 14:13-21).”

de-centering and re-centering of the self. In being crucified with Christ (Gal. 2:19-20), our “*wrongly* centered self” is decentered and is then replaced with Christ as our center.<sup>31</sup> This new center “opens the self up, makes it capable and willing to give itself for others and to receive others in itself.”<sup>32</sup> While we lived in Empire, our wrongly-centered self closed us off to others, and demanded that others must assimilate to our norm if they are to be recognized in our realm. Through *Jesús*, though, that colonized—or rather, colonizing—consciousness was crucified, and we have now been resurrected with a new *mestizo/a* consciousness which is capable of embracing the Other.

Herein lies our salvation: when we crucify our power and privilege and decisively embrace those who are Others, we open ourselves to sharing a degree of their shame and pain. This is not because we can undo who we were and the offenses we may have enacted against our brothers and sisters in the past, but because we can repent and turn away from that life and move in a new direction which risks our own honor through identification with the shamed. No empire is kind to those who defect from its ranks. When we march out of Egypt, chariots are sure to give chase. In sacrificing our former identity in order to open ourselves to identification with *Jesús* and his *familia*, we throw our lot in with theirs and trust in the justification that *Jesús* offers—not the justification that Empire offers. Though we may be hated and rejected because of the Son of Man, we may count our rejection as a blessing for we subscribe to a different honor system in the kingdom of *Jesús*.

---

<sup>31</sup> Volf, 69-70. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.



In the *familia* of *Jesús*, his Spirit justifies one's membership. Just as the Gentiles' membership in the church of Galatia was justified not by adherence to dietary or circumcision laws but by the presence of the Spirit in them,<sup>33</sup> so too we who come from privilege gain entry not because of our former status and power but because of *Jesús*' acceptance of us. The differences in ethnicity do not disappear in the *familia* of *Jesús*, but any differences in worth and privilege that are based on ethnicity do get challenged. Volf explains:

The Spirit does not erase bodily inscribed differences, but allows access into the one body of Christ to the people with such differences on the same terms. What the Spirit does erase (or at least loosen) is a stable and socially constructed correlation between differences and social roles. . . . Differentiating the body matters, but not for access to salvation and agency in the community.<sup>34</sup>

Membership in this *familia* is salvific for those of us who come from power and privilege because the binds that tied social privilege to our whiteness are broken. We are no longer defined by the privilege endowed by our skin, but by the unearned justification granted by the Spirit of *Jesús*. Our entrance into the "kin-dom of God"<sup>35</sup> is based on the privilege of the poor with whom we identify, not on the privilege of our white skin.

This abstract conceptualization of defection, identification, and justification cannot remain in the conceptual realm. We must ask what it means in our daily lives—*lo cotidiano*. What I have proposed thus far is not a physical departure from the power centers of the United States. Nor am I suggesting that we must burn our birth certificates and start a new multiethnic community in the wilderness. What I am proposing is that

---

<sup>33</sup> See Galatians 3:2-5.

<sup>34</sup> Volf, 48.

<sup>35</sup> See Ada María Isasi-Díaz, "Kin-dom of God: A Mujerista Proposal," in *In Our Own Voices: Latino/a Renditions of Theology*, 2010, 171–89.

white American Christians integrate the *Jesús* of Latino/a Christologies into our own theological systems, and that the ramifications of doing so include a departure from our privileged status in American society and the formation of a new identity as we place ourselves in positions of solidarity with Latinos/as and other minorities who face shame and exclusion. I hope that I have conveyed the risks inherent to this project. To accept *Jesús* is to reject Jesus—the white Christ who has been used to justify the oppression of black and brown peoples and to validate the authority of the White House. To depart from our privilege is to first admit that we possess a racialized privilege, and second to name it as a principality and power. To seek out a new identity based on solidarity with those who suffer in our society is to make ourselves vulnerable to the disdain of our peers and susceptible to the secondhand trauma that may result from sharing the pain of our *hermanas y hermanos*.

Of course, we cannot truly depart from the privilege ascribed to us by our society. As long as our white skin is visible, privilege will be ascribed to it. What we can do is relativize that ascription by placing ourselves in an alternative political body as completely as possible. That political body that stands as an alternative to the American (and every other) empire is none other than the body of *Jesús*. We must rescind our allegiance to America as a political entity and pledge it instead to the church—the body of *Jesús*. This departure from Empire to the kin-dom of *Jesús* is not a spatial departure, but “[takes] place *within the cultural space one inhabits*.”<sup>36</sup> It requires distancing oneself from one’s cultural and social identity, and instead moving closer toward an identity

---

<sup>36</sup> Volf, 49. Emphasis in the original.

based solely on membership in *Jesús' familia*. Volf beautifully illustrates the possibility that this internal departure creates: “The distance from my own culture that results from being born by the Spirit creates a fissure in me through which others can come in.”<sup>37</sup>

Only if we value the church and the kingdom of *Jesús* more than any kingdom of this world will we be capable of embracing the Other and living in the salvific new creation for which *Jesús* died and rose.

In this chapter I have proposed that *Jesús* can indeed be the savior of white Americans precisely because of his otherness and that to open our theological borders to him is to begin a journey toward a salvific new creation in which we must abandon our power and privilege in order to discover our new identity in the *familia* of *Jesús*. I have also situated this proposal within the larger postcolonial conversation. What still remains to be explored are what other effects an open-border Christology might have on our work of theology. Of particular interest moving forward will be two sets of questions: (1) Are the gospels for me if I am a person of ascribed privilege and power? If so, how am I to read them? Where do I find myself in the gospel narratives? (2) What might praxis look like for privilege-wielding followers of *Jesús*? How do we negotiate a distance from American sociopolitical life while also engaging in liberative praxis? These questions will be taken up in the following two chapters.

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 51.

#### Chapter 4: The Gospel of *Jesús*

Upon accepting that *Jesús* really is the Christ, another dilemma arises. If *Jesús* is who Latino/a theologians have said he is—the *mestizo* savior who makes a preferential option for the poor, most substantially by becoming one of them—then our interpretive frame of reference for reading the gospels has shifted. If *Jesús* is the Galilean *sato* and his followers are fellow *mestizos* in need of liberation from Jerusalem’s religiosity and Rome’s oppression, then where do I—someone who is labelled neither *sato* nor *mestizo*—find myself in the gospel narratives? Can I still identify with the disciples of Christ or perhaps with those who are healed, or must I only find myself in the villains of the gospel accounts? Is there room for the good news to be good for me? Of course, as I have set out in the previous chapter, I believe that *Jesús* and his gospel can indeed be salvific good news for *gringos/as*, but it is true that *Jesús*’ gospel does not necessarily appear to be good news for those of us who reside in the power centers of society. When *Jesús* says, “Blessed are you who are poor, but woe to you who are rich,” that does not sound particularly friendly toward we who live as the world’s wealthiest people.<sup>1</sup> Yet, many of us who live at the top also claim to follow Christ—the one who pronounces woes upon us. How do we reconcile this gap between the good news *Jesús* proclaims and the condemnation that privileged people hear?

---

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Shorrocks, Jim Davies, and Rodrigo Lluberas, “Global Wealth Report” (Credit Suisse Research Institute, October 2018), 8. According to Credit Suisse’s 2018 Global Wealth Report, “A person needs net assets of just USD 4,210 to be among the wealthiest half of world citizens in mid-2018.” Those with a net value of \$93,170 and higher are within the world’s wealthiest ten-percent.

Elizondo has said, “if the good news sounds bad for some, it is because it draws attention to something amiss.”<sup>2</sup> The first question, then, that the privileged reader must ask is, what is amiss? What concerns do I have that are preventing me from hearing good news in *Jesús*’ words? What am I afraid to give up for the sake of following *Jesús*? What short-term interests are distracting me from the long-term prospect of healing and liberation promised by *Jesús*? These questions represent an actualization of the flaring that occurs when we encounter *Jesús*. In the face of *Jesús*’ challenging gospel, we who wield power and privilege are forced into a moment of crisis in which we must reexamine who we are and what interests bind us. Fortunately, as Elizondo reminds us, “the good element” in this dilemma “is that [*Jesús*] offers a cure. The ultimate bad news would be if the sickness was never diagnosed and no cure sought, thus ensuring death. [*Jesús*] condemns the sickness of the world and offers it health, salvation. Even in condemnation, there is good news!”<sup>3</sup> So we follow *Jesús* along the *camino* of discipleship in order to receive his cure. Healing, of course, is not always a painless process and a good doctor does not simply speak kind words, but true ones. As we follow *Jesús*, then, let us be mindful that any “bad news” we hear in his gospel is spoken by a good doctor who is working toward our healing.

In this chapter I want to explore the challenges that arise when we white American readers try to find our place in the gospel narratives as we read with a new understanding of *Jesús*. More than that, though, I want to offer white readers a new

---

<sup>2</sup> Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise*, Revised (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 119.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

hermeneutical approach—one that our Latino/a brothers and sisters have taught us—and demonstrate what fruit that approach might bear as we re-navigate the gospels of *Jesús*. Below is my proposal that we read with an honest hermeneutic, learning from the interpretive approach of Latino/a scholars, followed by a liberative interpretation of a challenging gospel text.

### An Honest Hermeneutic

In chapter one, I examined the Latino/a theological method and concluded with the question of whether a *gringo/a* could do theology like a Latino/a. Here, I contend that while white believers cannot do Latino/a theology per se, they can indeed follow the same theological methodology to produce different—but just as liberative—interpretations of Scripture and reflective actions. To follow the interpretive methodology of a group to which we do not immediately belong is not to say there are no fruitful hermeneutical approaches found within white European and North American traditions. Rather, it is to enter the *mestizo* consciousness that is made possible when we embrace *Jesús* and his *familia*. It is the bringing together of two disparate realities—socially privileged readers and a methodology designed to liberate the oppressed—in order to produce a new kind of fruit.

Latino/a theologians generally follow a three-step methodology: (1) they *see* their surrounding context and experiences of oppression; (2) they *judge* what God may be speaking into their context through Scripture; (3) they *act* according to what they have determined to be proper, liberative action in light of the first two steps.<sup>4</sup> *Gringos/as* can

---

<sup>4</sup> See chapter 1.

follow this method as well. However, there will be key differences within each of the steps due to our distinct social positioning. Below I will examine each of these steps and will pose questions that white followers of *Jesús* will need to ask within each step if they are to discover the liberating good news of the gospels.

*See: What is Our Context?*

Before white readers of Scripture can approach the biblical texts, they must first survey their surroundings and recognize the context from which they engage the texts. Just as Latinos/as give an honest appraisal of their context, seeing and naming the injustices around them, white Americans must do the same. The difference will be that instead of understanding themselves as victims of those injustices, white Americans must be capable of seeing their own hands in the wrongs enacted against others.

Just as Latinos/as allow their theological reflection to be set in *lo cotidiano*—the everyday of their lives—so too, white Americans can begin there. This is a new approach for many white believers. Typically, theological thought has been believed to exist in the realm of logic, philosophy, and the academy. We can learn from our Latino/a brothers and sisters, however, that our everyday experiences are not disconnected from our reading of Scripture, our understandings of God, and our formulations of theological thought. In chapter one, we saw that Latinos/as, and *mujeristas* in particular, recognize that their experiences are valid sources of theological reflection and are used to make meaning with Christian scripture and tradition. Theological content grows out of our particular contexts. It is imperative, then, to fully understand that we live our lives in a particular setting and that forces affecting our daily lives do not affect everyone else in the same manner.

Seeing the privileges that define our everyday experiences is not easily done alone. In fact, it can be nearly impossible to identify the particularities of our context without others with whom to contrast. In a way, white Americans need Latinos/as and other minority groups to define our context for us. That is, we need them to point out where our lives differ from theirs—what worries we do not possess because of our privilege, what worries we do possess because of our privilege, what experiences are unique to white Americans, what beliefs we hold about ourselves and others because of our whiteness. We need others to understand ourselves. Fortunately, many (if not most) of us live in communities that are not homogenous. Many of us have non-white neighbors whose lives look very different from our own. If we are to reach an honest understanding of our own context, we will need trusting relationships with our non-white neighbors, friends, family, and church members that they might offer us an outside analysis of our lives. Personally, I have benefitted from the perspectives of my Latino/a *hermanos/as*, *amigos/as*, and *compadres*—all of whom have not been shy in naming the privileges which differentiate my life from their own. Were it not for their input, I would likely still believe that everyone more or less lived lives just like my own, and that if they did not, then they must have made some irresponsible choices. As we consider what experiences define our contexts, then, let us remember that our non-white brothers and sisters possess a unique vantage point of our lives and can open our eyes to seeing what sets the white American experience apart.

When Latinos/as examine *lo cotidiano*, they identify experiences of exclusion, derogatory name-calling, and racial biases. When white Americans examine their everyday (with the help of their non-white neighbors), those types of experiences are



largely unfamiliar. What, then, defines *lo cotidiano de gringos/as*? In general, white Americans do not face the barriers that Latinos/as encounter in their everyday experiences. White Americans generally feel secure in their identities and accepted in this society. White Americans generally have preferential access to educational, employment, financial, healthcare, and leadership opportunities. Generalities alone do not define the white American experience, however. When we consider specific experiences, we see what those general privileges really look like. In my own life, this privilege is experienced in a wide variety of manners: I am not fearful of police; I feel comfortable speaking to authority figures and know that my opinion will be taken seriously when aired; I am assumed to be *el jefe* (the boss) when I approach a group of agricultural field workers; when I go to the bank, doctor office, courthouse, school, or other institution, I know that my first language will be spoken there. These are some examples of the experiences that define my everyday life.

Each of the above cases of privilege experienced in my everyday corresponds with an institution or system that demands my devotion in exchange for the privilege it grants me. When our legal, judicial, economic, educational, and law enforcement institutions favor my needs and concerns at the expense of nonwhite others, they do so under the sway of principalities that have long been at work in our country. Privilege is a systemic occurrence that reflects the possession of our society by powers of whiteness and imperialism, and it is those powers which conscript me and other white Americans to be the vessels of their exclusionary rule. In my day-to-day, I do not face oppression, exclusion, or discrimination. Those forces are not what I need liberation from. What I need healing from is the guilt that accompanies my privilege, the disconnect I feel from

my non-white neighbors, the misplacement of my identity in racialized schemas, the amnesia I have toward my cultural belonging, and the codependency I have on unjust systems.

This is the context from which we privileged, white Americans seek out God's voice through Scripture. While others cry out to God from Pharaoh's brickyards, we cry out to God while standing on the very bricks made by those others. Our contextual differences from Latinos/as result in a different set of questions to be asked before approaching Scripture: What makes my context distinct? What daily experiences define who I am as a Bible-reader? Based on my everyday experiences, am I among the powerful or the powerless? Who would my non-white neighbor say I am? What forces bind me? In what ways is my life dependent on the exploitation of my neighbors? These questions involve seeing the world around us and seeing who it is that we are within our society. When answered honestly, they enable us to move toward the second theological task of judging God's voice speaking into our context through Scripture.

*Judge: What Do We Read?*

Once we recognize that we are endowed with social privilege, political sway, and a degree of power in virtually every space we enter, white Americans can then accept that we approach the biblical text with these experiences coloring our reading of it. If we have not comprehended what differentiates our context and what defines our identities as readers, then we might mistakenly approach the text thinking that (1) either Scripture is disinterested in our everyday experiences or (2) that we are the primary recipients of every promise and blessing spoken in Scripture.

In the first mistake, we are tempted to think that everyone reads the Bible in the same way and that there is a singular, objective meaning behind every text. Based on this line of thinking, Scripture does not necessarily attend to experiences of social privilege or exclusion because its meaning is located “behind” the text; the reader’s experience does not change the meaning of the text itself.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to this approach, a liberative honest hermeneutic acknowledges that meaning is made in collaboration with the text and that our experiences have a great deal to do with the meaning that emerges from the text.<sup>6</sup> Wolfgang Iser, a German literary scholar, explained the way in which our experiences interact with a text: “The structure of the text sets off a sequence of mental images which lead to the text translating itself into the reader’s consciousness. The actual content of these mental images will be colored by the reader’s existing stock of experience, which acts as a referential background against which the unfamiliar can be conceived and processed.”<sup>7</sup> While there certainly is still authorial intent “behind” every text, it is the way a reader’s experience interacts with the author’s chosen words and images that produce meaning for the reader. The interplay between experience and text is what enables Scripture to inform and transform *lo cotidiano*. If we are oblivious to the particularities of our own context, however, then we will not be capable of discerning

---

<sup>5</sup> Historical criticism is one example of a hermeneutical attempt to get at the meaning “behind” the text. Historical criticism depends on the assumption that anyone with the correct set of historical data and facts could discover the same original, true meaning of a text.

<sup>6</sup> Of course, meaning is not only determined by our individual experiences. Otherwise, biblical interpretation would become entirely relative. I believe the text itself is what determines the bounds of legitimate interpretations. So long as Scripture is seen as a partner in meaning-making and not just a mine of meaning-making materials, then our experiences may color the meaning of the text without overriding it.

<sup>7</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 38.

what actions God is calling us through Scripture to take in order to address the injustices witnessed in our everyday experiences.

The second mistake—believing that we white Americans are the primary recipients of every biblical promise—is also dependent on our overlooking the role of the reader’s context. If we do not realize who we are as privilege- and power-wielding readers, then we will presume that covenants made with Israel were just as equally made with Americans, that blessings spoken to the poor were actually spoken to the “spiritually poor,” and that any admonition in the New Testament was leveled against “the sinful,” not the rich or powerful. Willie Jennings traces these types of misinterpretations back to our “Gentile forgetfulness.” We have forgotten that, despite whatever power and privilege we now hold in our society, we who are not Jewish came to the faith first as outsiders. We were the marginal ones: first as non-Jews, doubly as ones associated with *Jesus*—himself a symbol of marginality. Somewhere along the way we Gentile Christians forgot we were Gentiles, thereby losing sight of our role in the story. Jennings writes, “Without a sense of the reality of being Gentiles growing and expanding in and with us, we declared that the biblical story was simply about the church and Christians and their destiny—in other words, all about us. The good of seeing ourselves through Scripture was distorted by the problems of not seeing ourselves rightly in Scripture.”<sup>8</sup> Forgetting, or dismissing, our Gentile-ness was perhaps the first act of colonizing the Christian tradition and narrative.<sup>9</sup> By doing so, we moved ourselves from the margins into the

---

<sup>8</sup> Willie James Jennings, “Overcoming Racial Faith,” *Divinity Magazine* 14, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 6.

<sup>9</sup> It should be acknowledged that Latinos/as and other non-Jewish minorities are also Gentiles. Jennings’ message about Gentile forgetfulness, though, is directed primarily at those who have seized the

center of the story and have since avoided any question of our legitimacy there.

Postcolonial theologies are now pointing out the colonizing consciousness with which we read Scripture and the interpretive errors that result. Naming our social location is the first step toward reading the Bible more honestly.

In an honest hermeneutic, experiences of power and privilege limit who we as white readers identify with in the biblical narratives. This is not a restriction; it is simply a reality. We cannot, for instance, identify as the poor who receive *Jesús*' blessings while also identifying as the rich who receive his woes (Luke 6:20-26)—at least not when we are reading with our nonwhite brothers and sisters. It becomes especially clear when we read alongside nonwhite believers that the words of *Jesús* and the biblical writers are not one-size-fits-all; they will mean something different to us depending on what experiences we as readers carry with us as we approach the text. This is good news because the goal of judging is to discern the voice of God amidst our everyday situations and particular contexts. Our interpretation of Scripture *must* mean something specific to our context if it is to make any meaningful difference in our lives and liberate us from those forces which bind us.

Based on our contexts of privilege and power, white Americans must ask the following pertinent questions when we attempt to judge the voice of God through Scripture: With which characters in this text can we honestly identify? What are the

---

Christian narrative and history for their own gain—i.e., colonizers. The colonized (Latin Americans, and by descent, Latinos included) never expropriated the biblical narrative because they never possessed the power to do so. The colonized world received an already-colonized gospel. Now, it would do good for all non-Jewish Bible readers to remember that they approach the text as Gentiles, but the problem of Gentile-forgetfulness as described by Jennings here, belongs primarily to white Europeans and Americans.

power dynamics at work within this narrative? Which readers are meant to read this text as good news? Are we the intended audience of this promise or blessing? If not, what meaning might it still have for us? What does it mean for a Gentile to read this text? What is God telling us about our privilege and power in this text? Is there liberation for us in this text? What do we do with texts that seem threatening to us and our social position? These are the types of questions that arise as we interpret Scripture with an honest appraisal of who we are as readers. There will be numerous texts in which we cannot find a character with whom we adequately resonate. There will also be texts which only sound like condemnation and judgment against us because of the social positions we occupy. We will wonder: Is the Bible even for us? Scripture may seem surprisingly unfriendly and unfair toward us at times. When we encounter such texts and feel excluded from the story of salvation, we must remember that we do indeed come to the biblical text as outsiders, but we come to it because *Jesús* has invited us to do so. There is good news to be found in it for us too if we can honestly and humbly accept our distance from the text and follow whatever call *Jesús* places on our lives.

*Act: What Shall We Do?*

After seeing what makes our context unique and judging what God may be saying to us through Scripture, the next step is to discern what actions ought to be taken to move toward liberation. Just like the previous two steps, this one is slightly different when practiced by *gringos/as* in comparison to *Latinos/as*. *Latinos/as* see, judge, and act in order to achieve liberation from the racialized exclusion and economic exploitation that they experience. White Americans, in contrast, do not suffer the same exclusion and exploitation. Rather, they are typically on the excluding and exploiting end of *Latinos/as*'

experiences. It is a different type of liberation, then, that white Americans must take action toward. What the biblical texts reveal to us (as will be explicated below) is that we who hold social privilege and power need rescuing from the forces that conscript us to exclude the Other, and healing from the guilt we have accrued through the injustices enacted by our people and the blindness we have maintained toward the sufferings of others. Orthopraxis—correct practice—for the white American, then, will involve taking real steps to loosen the grip with which the principalities of Empire hold our consciences and allegiances.

What is more, our own liberation is tied to that of Latinos/as and other colonized peoples. When we take actions to free ourselves from the excluding forces that conscript us, we are joining our Latino/a brothers and sisters as they struggle against those same forces from the underside of Empire. Our defecting means enlisting in the resistance, subverting the principalities from the positions in which we find ourselves. The way we resist will look different from the way Latinos/as resist, but our efforts are nevertheless united. Allowing Latinos/as and others to help us see our own privileged contexts and reading Scripture alongside them will allow us to collaboratively enact liberative actions.

One Sunday morning I was leading a Bible study on Isaiah 65:17-25, Yahweh's promise of a new creation. I was the only white man in the room. The other participants were all Latinos/as. After reading and discussing the passage, I admitted to them that I personally felt disconnected from the text. I pointed to promises like those in Isaiah 65:21-22: "They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat." Yahweh's promise of labor and economic justice did not seem like a necessary promise

for me. I do not labor in anyone else's field; I do not build anyone else's house. Rather, others labor in my field and others have built my house, and I feel a sense of guilt because of that. While my Latino/a brothers and sisters were able to find themselves within the text—they have actually labored in others' fields—I did not see a promise in it for me. Yet they helped me imagine how I might be faithful even when I find myself in the position of *el jefe*, overseeing the labor of others. Their suggestions were not impractical. They taught me some basic Spanish phrases to use in order to build trust with the farmworkers who labored in our fields and suggested that I carry a water cooler in my truck to offer them a drink on those blistering Central Valley days. While such actions might initially seem rather small, they represent the types of liberative praxis that can emerge from an honest hermeneutic. Those small actions serve as forms of resistance—resistance to the narrative which says that I am only *el jefe* and that Latino/a farmworkers are only cogs in an agricultural production machine. To address the Latino/a farmworker in his or her native tongue and to offer water to the thirsty is to humanize them for a moment within a system that largely dehumanizes them. As Latino/a farmworkers take their own liberative actions in protest against their exploitation, I can resist the exploitative powers by humanizing my brothers and sisters whom those powers have told me to dehumanize and including my brothers and sisters who I have been told to exclude.

My above example is one demonstration of what liberative actions the see-judge-act method can produce for white Americans. Further consideration of praxis will be taken up in the next chapter. For now, let me suggest what questions white Americans must ask as they move from judging the calling of *Jesús* through Scripture to taking liberative action. As we read biblical texts, we must consider the following: Based on



who we find ourselves to be in this text, what imperative is given to us through our interpretation of the text? What might it look like to act on that imperative in our everyday lives? If we do not immediately see ourselves in the text, then whose liberation does the text call us to work toward? How might that work free us from some form of our own bondage as well? To which principalities and powers does this text alert us? Based on this text, how might we resist those principalities and powers? Such questions are broad and open-ended. When we read specific texts, however, our questions about liberative action can become more narrow and practicable.

#### Good News for Gringos/as: The Sermon on the Plain

Having now examined the three steps of seeing, judging, and acting, I now want to integrate the three by attempting a liberative reading of a key gospel text in which it might otherwise be difficult for privileged white Americans to find good news. In the following interpretation, attention will be given to how white Americans' context informs our point of entry into the narrative, what good news can be judged to emerge from the text for *gringos/as*, and what liberative actions *Jesús* might be calling us to take.

I began this thesis with a story about struggling to make sense of Luke's beatitudes. Throughout this work, I have also referenced the text as an obstacle for *gringo/a* readers such as myself. Yet, I maintain that there is good news in Luke's beatitudes and *Jesús*' Sermon on the Plain even for privileged white Americans. The text in question reads as follows:

Then [*Jesús*] looked up at his disciples and said:

- “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.
- “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.
- “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

“Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

“Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.” (6:20-26)

Theories abound regarding who *Jesús* is really blessing and who he is really cursing.

Some maintain that Luke’s beatitudes ought to be read like Matthew’s—pertaining to spiritual categories.<sup>10</sup> Others say that the Lukan beatitudes are about the restoration of

Israel and should be read in the same manner as Isaiah.<sup>11</sup> Still others see parallels

between the Sermon on the Plain and Psalm 1, with the effect being that Luke, like the

psalmist, is talking about the righteous and the wicked.<sup>12</sup> But what about us? About

whom do we, as honest readers, find this text to be? What meaning is made for us as our experiences and contexts interact with the words of *Jesús*?

When I think about the experiences with which I, as a white American reader, come to Luke’s text, poverty, hunger, and weeping are not the first descriptors that come

---

<sup>10</sup> This seems to be the default reading among American lay readers. There is often little acknowledgment that Luke and Matthew (and the other gospel writers) have authorial intention in the way they present material. If it is believed that the gospel writers were simply dictating the words of Jesus, then differences between gospels are presumed to be inconsistencies. Therefore, those inconsistencies must be smoothed out by using Matthew, for instance, to interpret Luke’s words. After all, it is assumed, the gospel writers are telling the same story—so they must mean the same thing. Luke’s Beatitudes, then, are often spiritualized to mean the “spiritually poor” are the blessed.

<sup>11</sup> For a critique of this reading, see Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 77. Green points out that those who take this approach fail to appreciate that Luke already reinterprets the Isaiah text. Therefore, Luke must want his readers to find some new, fuller meaning in Isaiah’s words when they are uttered by Jesus of Nazareth—particularly in Luke 4:18-19. It will not suffice to assume that Luke intends the very same meanings as Isaiah.

<sup>12</sup> See David L Bartlett, “The Beatitudes,” *Journal for Preachers* 40, no. 2 (2017): 13–19.

to mind. That said, there are of course many white people who do experience poverty, hunger, and mourning at deep levels that I do not wish to discount. Certainly, at times in my own life, I have wept in moments of loss and grief. Poverty and hunger, though, are not part of my story, and weeping is certainly not a defining factor of it. As for the fourth blessing, reserved for those hated and excluded because of their association with Christ, that too does not seem to pertain to me. After all, this country was designed by and for white, male Protestant Christians like myself; there is no persecution of Christians in the United States.<sup>13</sup> I do not enter this scene, then, as one who is blessed by *Jesús*.

As to the descriptors of those who receive woes, I fit the bill. As a middle-class American, I am considered “rich” by virtually all standards (“Woe to you who are rich”). I have never experienced real hunger but have always had plenty (“Woe to you who are full now”). Generally, my life has been defined by times of comfort and joy more than suffering and sorrow (“Woe to you who are laughing now”). As a white American, I have been granted privilege and acceptance by virtue of my being white and Christian in the United States; nothing about my social identity is inherently threatening to the status quo (“Woe to you when all speak well of you”). Therefore, I cannot honestly locate myself amongst the recipients of *Jesús*’ blessings, but only amongst those who receive woes. What good news can be found in this text then? To what liberative actions might *Jesús* be calling me through these difficult words?

---

<sup>13</sup> There are those in the U.S. who argue that Christians do experience persecution, primarily from liberal secularists. However, it is clear that political opposition, philosophical disagreements, and mockery do not equate with the persecution experienced by those first-century Christians living under Roman rule who would have been reading Luke’s gospel account.

After accepting that we rich, well-fed, laughing, respected *gringos/as* are not the beneficiaries of *Jesús*' blessings, it may feel that we have no place in the kingdom of *Jesús* nor among his followers. However, we must not believe that his preferential option made on behalf of the poor thereby excludes us from seeking his kingdom.<sup>14</sup> Joel Green reminds us that “[*Jesús*’] pronouncements of blessing and woe in Luke 6:20-26 function ascriptively rather than prescriptively; they relate not so much how things ought to be as how things in fact are. They define the life-world and associated dispositions of God’s kingdom as these are revealed in [*Jesús*’] coming.”<sup>15</sup> *Jesús* is not proclaiming an eternal curse upon those who are wealthy and privileged but is describing the reversal of honor codes which defines his kingdom. In the social body that is his kingdom, *Jesús* “[brings] down the powerful from their thrones, and [lifts] up the lowly” (Luke 1:52) not to allow the lowly to exercise power over the proud, but to bring all into equal standing before him. “The good news,” says Green, “has a flattening or leveling effect, so that one’s status before God and among God’s people is determined not by relative wealth or health or gender, but simply by God’s kindness and compassion for all (cf. Luke 6:35-36).”<sup>16</sup>

The woes that *Jesús* issues us, then, are not curses but forewarnings of what is to come for those who choose to follow him. For the privileged reader, the woes are illustrations of what it will mean to give up our privileged status and humbly stand on

---

<sup>14</sup> Joel B Green, “Good News to the Poor: A Lukan Leitmotif,” *Review & Expositor* 111, no. 2 (May 2014): 177, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034637314524374>. Green writes, “Jesus’ dependence on the benefaction of others (Luke 8:1-3) forbids our portraying Jesus as an ascetic who rejects wealth on principle. Similarly, his presence with prominent people at festive meals—dinner parties where his behavior leads to his being branded as a glutton and a drunk (Luke 7:34; cf. Luke 7:36; 11:37; 14:1-24; 19:1-27)—ensures that his openhandedness to the poor does not signal a practiced exclusion of the rich.”

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

level ground—a plain—with those we formerly believed to be below us in honor and status. Though we have enjoyed riches, we will be asked to share those riches with our poor brothers and sisters. Though we have been well-fed, we will need to give up our bread for the sake of our hungry brothers and sisters. Though we have laughed joyfully in our lives, we will mourn and weep as we take on the sorrows of our brothers and sisters, sharing in their struggles for liberation and life. Though we have been spoken well of and honored by others, we will be shamed once we identify ourselves with our newfound brothers and sisters who have been hated and excluded to the peripheries of our society.

This sounds like bad news. This sounds like following *Jesús* will only mean loss for us—loss of security, loss of comfort, loss of happiness, loss of status. The good news, however, is found on the plain. The plain upon which Luke locates *Jesús*' sermon is not insignificant, for the plain represents the leveling of hierarchies that the kingdom of *Jesús* demands. Some will come down from mountains and others will come up from low-lying coastlands, but all will stand “on a level place”—equals as disciples of *Jesús*.<sup>17</sup> The good news for the privileged is that we have been counted among “his disciples” standing upon the plain,<sup>18</sup> and the plain is the borderland where *mestizo* consciousness is born.<sup>19</sup> The

---

<sup>17</sup> Luke 6:17 reads, “He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.”

<sup>18</sup> In 6:20, Luke says that *Jesús* “looked up at his disciples” and then pronounced the blessings and woes, signifying that both poor and rich were already counted among his disciples. The woes, then, do not exclude the rich but make clear the cost of discipleship.

<sup>19</sup> Recall Elizabeth Conde-Frazier’s description of intercultural encounters: “an encounter is where we risk. It is a place for the collision of two worlds—for the multiplicity of views. It is where various streams meet. It is the bringing together of a variety of sources that might not often be placed together. This is the borderland. In these spaces, hybrid significations are created, requiring the practice of cultural translations and negotiations. It is here that we transcend dualistic modes of thinking and come to understand how opposing ideas can interact with one another. This place is called *mestizo/a* consciousness.” See note 23 in chapter 3.

plain is where two parties—rich and poor, highland and lowland, insider and outsider—meet a third and are (re)deemed a new creation. On the plain, both the poor and the rich encounter *Jesús* and are assigned new identities: disciples. The good news for the previously poor, hungry, weeping, and shamed disciple is that *Jesús* honors them as privileged members of his kingdom. The good news for the previously rich, well-fed, laughing, and honored disciple is that, though the road of discipleship will require our forfeiture of securities and conveniences, the Great Liberator has not omitted us from his plan of salvation. Like a good doctor, he gives us a forthright diagnosis and treatment: Our riches and privileges have infected our consciences, inhibiting our ability to commune with God’s people. Healing, then, will require those infected areas of our lives be cut out and remedied—a painful but necessary process.

Liberative healing happens on the plain. The crowds that gathered on the plain that day “had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured” (Luke 6:18). When we leave our positions atop mountain-high hierarchies and humbly come to *Jesús* on the plain, he heals our diseases and releases us from the spirits that trouble us. For white Americans, those spirits are the powers and principalities which infect our social imagination<sup>20</sup>—whiteness, greed, guilt, wealth, superciliousness, nationalism, ethnocentrism, xenophobia, etc. When we stand beside the blessed poor upon the plain, accepting the woes as the costs of discipleship,

---

<sup>20</sup> Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 6-9. Jennings identifies the Christian social imagination as “diseased” (6) due to its being “woven into processes of colonial dominance” (8). Though Christianity was born with an inherent propensity toward intimacy, it has since been “historically formed to resist” such propensities, thereby “[yielding] a form of religious life that thwarts its deepest instincts of intimacy (9).”

then we begin our process of healing. By counteracting our privileges—giving up our riches, bread, ease of life, and good name for the sake of others—we weaken the hold that the troubling spirits hold over us. No longer must we identify as “the privileged” or “the powerful” or play the game in which the principalities have enlisted us. Instead, we can flee to the plain, take on new identities as citizens in the kingdom of *Jesús*, and be healed of the harm inflicted upon our consciences and imaginations by the imperial, colonizing principalities.

To flee to the plain and defect to the kingdom of *Jesús* does not mean that we remain in the wilderness, disengaged from society’s power centers. The plain—the borderland—is the place of new creation in which both rich and poor are formed into a new kind of people, but it is only the beginning of the discipleship journey. Liberative action must be taken. *Jesús* does not stay in Galilee; he *must* move toward Jerusalem<sup>21</sup> and we must accompany him. To what kinds of actions might *Jesús* be calling us upon the plain? He is calling us to actions which thwart the instincts of our colonized and colonizing mind. In the remainder of his sermon on the plain (Luke 6:27-49), *Jesús* instructs those who will listen to engage in counterintuitive actions: love your enemies (6:27), turn the other cheek (6:29), give to all who ask (6:30), lend without expectation of any gain (6:35), be as merciful as is God (6:36), forgive rather than condemn others (6:37). These types of actions undo the desires and fears inculcated within us by the powers of Empire and exclusion. When we love our enemy, we resist the impulse to demonize and hate them. When we turn our other cheek, we oppose the urge to protect

---

<sup>21</sup> See chapter 3, note 11.

our honor by doing violence and instead hold to the honor ascribed to us by *Jesús*. When we give more than is asked of us and lend without expecting anything in return, we combat the avarice (disguised as necessary “self-interest”) upon which our capitalistic society is built.

The directives issued by *Jesús* in the Sermon on the Plain are not simply keys to piety nor unrealistic expectations designed to expose our depravity. Rather, they are the types of actions that lead to our healing and liberation. In the kingdom of *Jesús*, they are realistic options. *Jesús* closes his sermon with an exhortation to act on such options:

Why do you call me “Lord, Lord,” and do not do what I tell you? I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built his house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house. (Luke 6:46-49)

Action, *Jesús* says, is what determines one’s fortitude. One can come to the plain and hear the words of *Jesús*, but if no action is taken, then that person will be swept away when the level ground turns out to be a floodplain. The proper kind of action is not tent-pitching but house-building. Tents have no foundation because they are designed to be disassembled and moved. The liberation *Jesús* offers, though, is not a momentary trend; it is not a transient experiment in doing good. Rather, it is an entire reorienting of one’s life. It requires the building of a new house with a new foundation—one that can withstand the floodwaters that are sure to come. In the next chapter, I will offer some ideas of how privileged white Americans can move from an honest hermeneutic to actions that make real their liberation from the powers that bind them.



## **Chapter 5: Praxis for Gringos/as**

In chapter four, I recounted my experience of leading a Bible study with Latino/a participants in which they helped me imagine what concrete actions I could take to aid the liberation of Latino/a farmworkers and, in so doing, aid my own liberation as well. Several months prior to that experience, I led another Bible study—this one, though, was with only white participants. As part of the study, which was focused on the theme of biblical justice, I shared the story of a Latino pastor in the United States who was abruptly deported for lacking documentation. He was taken in the middle of the night from his home without even a chance to say goodbye to his wife and children. I asked my fellow Bible study participants what types of injustice they observed in the pastor’s story. The room fell silent, eyes lowered to stare the table, and I stood there astounded that my participants were either incapable or unwilling to name any injustice done to this undocumented person—their Christian brother at that. As I was more or less aware of their political persuasions prior to the study, I knew this might be an uncomfortable task to ask of my group, but I never expected that they would choose silence over any attempt to empathize. When my white brothers and sisters fell silent, the “bellicose musical”<sup>1</sup> of the imperial powers was plainly heard.

In contrast to the Bible study in which my Latino/a participants helped me imagine what actions I could take, this Bible study experience was prevented from moving toward praxis because the powers of exclusion and political ideology overruled the group’s social imaginations. This experience demonstrates some of the obstacles that

---

<sup>1</sup> See chapter 3, footnote 23.

white Americans face when they attempt to move toward liberative praxis. We white Americans are not as free as we might think we are; there are forces restricting our imaginations, inhibiting us from making free choices of action. The liberation that we must work toward, then, is our own just as much as it is our oppressed neighbor's. Praxis for Latinos/as and other oppressed groups means protesting and revolting against systems that exploit and dehumanize them. Praxis for *gringos/as*, in comparison, means defecting from and rebelling against those systems which do not oppress us but benefit us. For by benefitting us, they seduce us into defending and justifying them at the cost of our marginalized Christian brothers and sisters, thereby overriding the social imagination made possible by *Jesús* on the plain and ultimately harming us in our ability to commune with others.

In this chapter I intend to suggest ways in which *gringos/as* might actualize the liberation and social imagination found on the plain even while residing in Jerusalem—the power center of society. Doing so will require actions rooted in a character of cruciformity and alternative allegiance, as well as consistent communal reflection on those actions to ensure we have not been misled by the powers of Empire. Below, I will address the two parts of praxis—action and reflection—as they relate to *gringos/as*' efforts to overcome the powers that bind them.

### Liberative Action

Praxis is not about taking action out of a “do good” mentality or moral obligation so much as it is about embodying the spirit of liberation that *Jesús* makes possible. The leveling liberation that *Jesús* introduces on the plain becomes more realized throughout his ministry, culminates in his death and resurrection, and continues today within and

amongst us when we live liberated and liberating lives. To live such lives is to abide in the Spirit of *Jesús*, emulating his cruciformity and avowing our citizenship in the kingdom of *Jesús*.

Praxis is not disconnected from Christology. If praxis involves the emulation of Christ, then it is vital we know which Jesus we are emulating. *Jesús*, as he has been presented throughout this thesis, is one who shares in the sufferings of the vulnerable, makes a preferential option for the poor, empowers the powerless to join his liberating mission, and denounces the injustices of the power centers. For a *gringo/a* to follow *Jesús*, then, one must emulate these initiatives and the character with which *Jesús* carries them out. Following *Jesús* will mean embodying the “for-otherness” that he demonstrates in his own life, death, and resurrection. Justo González insists that it is *Jesús*’ for-otherness that defines both his divinity and humanity.<sup>2</sup> In positing *Jesús*’ for-otherness as an expression of not only his divinity but also his full humanity, González alerts us to the good news of emulating *Jesús*—namely that in living for others we recover the true humanity with which we were endowed at creation. González writes, “What [*Jesús*] has done is precisely to open for us the way of love, to free us so that we too can begin to be for others. In being for others we are most truly human. And in being most truly human we are most Godlike. Indeed, God did become human so that we could become divine!”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Justo L. González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 152. González says that we must not think of Christ’s divinity and humanity as two opposing poles, but rather as two integral parts of Christ’s identity that are both expressed as for-otherness. He writes, “it is precisely in his being for others that [*Jesús*] manifests his full divinity, and it is also in his being for others that he manifests his full humanity.”

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 155. González is clear that this notion of theosis is not a metaphysical one—humans cannot transform into the being who is the creator God. The theosis he is discussing is about recovering the creative mandate that humans be God’s image-bearers, reflecting God’s character and rule in the world. To become Godlike, González says, is “to grow into closer communion with God, and thus become more like

Our own liberation from the powers that distort our humanity, then, is intimately linked to our taking action on behalf of others whose humanity has been all but stolen by powers of exclusion, oppression, and exploitation. Our liberation—our recovery of true humanity—depends on our commitment to that of others. What, then, will it look like for *gringos/as* to emulate *Jesús*, to live for others? Here are some ideas:

### *Sharing in Suffering*

Praxis is about bringing about liberative transformation; it is about embodying the ways of *Jesús* so as to set captives free. In order for *gringos/as* to do this work, though, we must first enter the stories of the suffering. Knowledge of systemic oppression does not come firsthand for white Americans. In order to imagine and act toward the liberation of our brothers and sisters (and by extension, ourselves), we first need to see what their suffering truly looks like in the present. We must hear their stories, offer ourselves as allies in their struggles, and help share the weight of their pain by joining them in solidarity.

When black and brown communities march in protest against discriminatory police brutality, we must listen. When farm laborers speak out against maltreatment in the fields, we must listen. When immigrant mothers weep for their children who were separated from them at the border, we must listen. When women, and particularly women of color, ask to share the pulpit, we must listen. Listening, without projecting politicized opinions about others' stories, is the first act of human compassion. We cannot be for others without first having heard and empathized with the most painful realities of their

---

God. God's very being is love, for-otherness. This is the Trinitarian God. This is the God revealed in Jesus Christ."

lives. Upon hearing the stories of those who suffer, we can then choose to sit in their pain with them, to lament with them and on their behalf, to feel the same emotions with them, and to begin working alongside them toward a more just reality.

*Preferential Option for the Poor*

To make a preferential option for the poor, as *Jesús* does, we must suspend our self-interest and consider what is best for our neighbors who do not enjoy the privileges of our own lives. This is no easy task, for democracy and capitalism have collaboratively trained us to seek out our own interests, believing that if everyone does the same, we will produce the best possible outcomes for the largest portion of society. What we have not been told, however, is that these systems have been twisted in such a way that they actually favor the votes and dollars of the wealthy and powerful, thereby producing the best possible outcome for the richest portion of society. To follow *Jesús* within this society built on self-interest, then, *gringos/as* must forsake their self-interest in exchange for their neighbors' interests. When we vote, we are free to do so with the interests of the poor in mind rather than our own. What policies benefit my poor neighbors (even if they do not benefit me)? How would they vote?<sup>4</sup> When we spend money, we are free to first consider what types of demand we are creating. Who will benefit from my spending?

---

<sup>4</sup> I have often wondered whether participation in the voting process too closely ties us to Empire. By my voting, am I simply placing my stamp of approval on a system and its outcomes that largely benefit the rich and powerful? When I cast a vote for president, am I forsaking the lordship of *Jesús*? My Latino/a brothers and sisters have pointed out to me that such questions themselves reflect a degree of my privilege. Not everyone has the luxury of abstaining from voting without real consequence on their daily life. For the Latino/a community, issues of federal policy (immigration policies in particular) have real effects. Hence, they do not have the time nor the felt freedom to ask theological and philosophical questions about the process; voting is simply one of the few avenues for them to attempt positive change for their community and families. Voting as my Latino/a neighbor would vote, then, seems like the most helpful use of my vote. Rather than voting based on my self-interest, and rather than abstaining from voting on theological grounds, I can use my vote to aid Latino/a liberation efforts.

Who will suffer because of my spending? Whose job depends on these dollars? What conditions do my neighbors work under in order to provide me with this good or service? How would my poor neighbors prefer I spend my money?

Living with a preferential option for the poor is not limited to participation in democracy and capitalism. There are other spaces in which we white Americans must choose to suspend our self-interest (church leadership, educational opportunities, housing equality, etc.), but the objective in every instance is to make choices that benefit the poor and excluded even if those choices do not immediately benefit ourselves. This is not some shallow attempt at affirmative action. Rather, it is an honest attempt to treat the shamed as they really are—the honored recipients of the kingdom of *Jesús*. The kingdom is theirs, not ours. If we wish to join this kingdom, then, we must reorient our imaginations and our actions to reflect the honor code of *Jesús*' kingdom rather than that of our present order. As De La Torre puts it, “If those privileged in our present reality ever hope to participate in God’s reign, they will need a letter of reference from the dispossessed and disenfranchised of today, who will hold they keys to the future.”<sup>5</sup> Our salvation—our liberation—is wrapped up in theirs.

### *Empowering the Powerless*

*Jesús* not only chooses the poor as his own but empowers them as leaders of his liberating mission. *Jesús*-following *gringos/as* must encourage and empower them as well. *Jesús* calls the oppressed out from Galilee to join him on the journey to Jerusalem. When we *gringos/as* choose to join that *camino*, then, we ought to remember that it was

---

<sup>5</sup> Miguel A. De La Torre, *The Politics of Jesús: A Hispanic Political Theology* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 131.

not our mission first. We join the mission of liberation in supporting roles more than leading roles. That does not mean that we have a lesser place or a lesser belonging in the *familia* of *Jesús*. It means that the best way for us to serve the purpose of liberation is to follow our poor brothers and sisters as they lead the march that *Jesús* began long ago. The powers of whiteness and exceptionalism have trained *gringos/as* to assume superiority of logic, capability, and wisdom. Giving up that assumption—nailing it to the tree—is part of our own liberation. When we meet our neighbors on the plain and *Jesús* coalesces us into one people, we become free to let our non-white brothers and sisters lead. We become free to trust them with the kind of trust that *Jesús* has in them.<sup>6</sup>

In giving up our sense of superiority and trusting others to lead the mission of liberation, we honor them as trustworthy equals in the kingdom of God and empower them in the mission for which *Jesús* has called them. Paulo Freire, in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, contends that the oppressed must be the pioneers of their own liberation which, in turn, puts them at the fore of our own liberation as well.<sup>7</sup> Freire's primary concern is education, but Gilberto Lozano and Federico Roth have extrapolated his ideas

---

<sup>6</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos, 30th Anniversary Edition (New York: Herder and Herder, 2010). Freire says that a praxis that is liberating for both the oppressed and the oppressors requires that the oppressors learn to trust the oppressed—to see them as capable leaders (which is how *Jesús* sees them). To join their efforts without full trust will result in hollow activism at best. Freire writes, “To achieve this praxis [one involving both action and reflection], however, it is necessary to trust in the oppressed and in their ability to reason. Whoever lacks this trust will fail to initiate (or will abandon) dialogue, reflection, and communication, and will fall into using slogans, communiqués, monologues, and instructions. Superficial conversions to the cause of liberation carry this danger.”

<sup>7</sup> Freire, 56. “It is only the oppressed who, by freeing themselves, can free their oppressors. The latter, as an oppressive class, can free neither others nor themselves. It is therefore essential that the oppressed wage the struggle to resolve the contradiction in which they are caught; and the contradiction will be resolved by the appearance of the new man: neither oppressor nor oppressed, but man in the process of liberation.”

to guide postcolonial praxis as well.<sup>8</sup> They take Freire's guideline that privileged academics let the oppressed be the leaders of their own liberation and apply it to biblical interpretation. "When it comes to interpretation," they write, "it is imperative that scholars and allies from the West surrender, or at least be flexible with, their models of biblical interpretation."<sup>9</sup> If we privileged Western Bible interpreters immediately flag the interpretations and models of others as "non-scholarly" or "too interested" in their liberating "agendas," then we will both stifle the efforts of the lowly and prevent ourselves from ever hearing the liberative good news that their interpretations might have for us as well. Despite (or perhaps because of) all of our privileges, we white scholars do not stand in a position to correct the interpretations of our non-white brothers and sisters; mostly, we stand to be corrected.<sup>10</sup>

Freire's guideline can be taken further. Trust in our non-white brothers and sisters must also be cultivated in our churches and communities. Participation of people of color in church leadership structures must go beyond tokenism. Predominately or historically

---

<sup>8</sup> Gilberto Lozano and Federico A. Roth, "The Problem and Promise of Praxis in Postcolonial Criticism," in *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations: Global Awakenings in Theology and Praxis*, eds. Kay Higuera Smith, Jayachitra Lalitha, and Daniel L. Hawk (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 190-195.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>10</sup> De La Torre, 17-18. De La Torre makes the point that non-white scholars actually have a broader knowledge base: "Religion scholars of color are required to master the theological and ethical analysis of Euroamericans in order to be awarded a coveted PhD, while no one from the dominant culture needs to learn anything about the Hispanic margins to earn that same degree. One can argue therefore that Latinos/as (along with all who are marginalized) hold an epistemological privilege over and against Euroamericans. This does not mean they are smarter or holier, just that they master the world of the dominant culture and their own marginalized spaces. . . . The multiple consciousness possessed by the disenfranchised generally makes their perspective closer to any type of 'truth' than the opinions and views of those who benefit from how society is structured." Of course, this does not mean that mutually enlightening critique and conversation cannot take place between white and non-white interpreters. It means, rather, that white scholars ought to approach the theologies and interpretations of others with more humility and grace, considering what can be learned from the Other.



white churches ought to encourage non-white leadership, not for the sake of some multicultural appearance or political correctness, but for the very real sake of furthering the liberation of their members—white and non-white. It will take people who have not benefitted from the structures of society and of the church to guide local congregations toward practices and considerations that reflect the reign of *Jesús* more than the reign of Caesar. More will be said of this below.

### *Confronting the Powers*

*Gringos/as* following *Jesús* will inevitably find themselves on the road back to Jerusalem, or perhaps like Paul, to Rome. Defectors, though, are never welcome back in the empire. Having met *Jesús* on the plain and communing with the poor who have become our *familia*, we white Americans must choose whether to remain silent or raise our voice against our previous benefactors who are the very powers which have oppressed our Christian brothers and sisters. Following *Jesús* puts white Americans in a precarious situation—caught between allegiances and required to choose one. We must choose whether our ultimate loyalty is with *Jesús* and the poor, or with the flag that flies overhead. We must decide where our citizenship lies. We can choose to join our oppressed brothers and sisters as citizens of the kingdom of *Jesús*, residing as aliens in the American empire (Eph. 2:19; Phil. 3:20), or we can choose to maintain our allegiance to the flag and consider any identification with *Jesús* as secondary. The problem with the latter option is that neither *Jesús* nor Empire ask for a split devotion; they both call our whole selves to their service.

Choosing to answer the call of *Jesús* will mean siding with our oppressed brothers and sisters no matter the cost. This will mean joining them when they protest corporate

and political leaders who exploit and overlook the poor and powerless, even when those corporate and political leaders favor our own white, middle-class interests. It will mean dismantling the innocent history told of our nation's beginnings, naming the injustices and cruelties carried out against people of color in the name of the American experiment—even if doing so reveals an unfriendly and uncomfortable portrait of ourselves. It will mean identifying and admitting our racial biases in order to model for other white Americans how to engage their own biases rather than deny them. Such actions must be taken for the sake of the liberation of both our oppressed brothers and sisters and our own constricted minds. By challenging and critiquing the ruling powers alongside the poor and exploited, we not only bolster their voices but also realize our citizenship in the kingdom of *Jesús*. Taking action against the systems of oppression loosens our allegiance to those systems and frees us to redirect that allegiance to *Jesús* and his liberative mission.

*In All Things, Cruciformity*

The types of actions I have suggested above represent experiments in cruciformity. That is, they are attempts to follow *Jesús* in forgoing privilege, taking on a position of humility, identifying with the suffering, and, in so doing, becoming the suffering with them. In Philippians 2, Paul utilizes the “Christ hymn” to encourage the Philippian followers of *Jesús* to model themselves after *Jesús*' cruciformity:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
 who, though he was in the form of God,  
 did not regard equality with God  
 as something to be exploited,  
 but emptied himself,  
 taking the form of a slave,  
 being born in human likeness.  
 And being found in human form,

he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross. (2:5-8)

Cruciformity is a mode of being to which all followers of *Jesús* are called.<sup>11</sup> For some, emptiness and humility already define their lives; many already know what it is to inhabit the form of a slave.<sup>12</sup> For the privileged *gringo/a*, though, there is a greater learning curve to cruciformity. Humility and sacrificial emptying must be learned. We who hold privilege and power in our society have something to lose. Emptying ourselves of our status and securities comes to a choice; it is not forced upon us as it is many of our nonwhite brothers and sisters.

Taking the form of a slave, humbling ourselves, and obeying a higher (and more dangerous) order are the key challenges to a liberative *gringo/a* praxis. Fortunately, we do not attempt it alone. Though we will inevitably revert to our colonized minds at times, we will have the *familia de Jesús* to remind us that we have been liberated.

### Communal Reflection

The second aspect of praxis is reflection upon the actions we have taken. The primary question of this reflection is whether our actions have proven liberating. If they

---

<sup>11</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 105f. Gorman suggests that Paul interprets the cruciformity of Christ (and of God) as holiness—not only the holiness of Christ, but a holiness for believers to embody. Gorman writes, “Paul’s experience of Son, Father, and Spirit resulted in his radical reconstruction of holiness as both a counterintuitive divine attribute/activity ... and a countercultural human imperative and process that is inherently communal. This unique, cruciform and Trinitarian vision of holiness may be summarized in a paraphrase of Leviticus: ‘You shall be cruciform, for I am cruciform’” (106).

<sup>12</sup> This does not mean that the state of suffering is somehow glorified. It simply means that those who have been exploited and oppressed have an immediate and intimate knowledge of what it means to suffer—what it means to feel emptied out. Both *Jesús* and the oppressed know this experience of ultimate humility. Of course, suffering is not the end of the story for either *Jesús* nor his followers. The story continues on to resurrection. God redeems those who suffer—freeing the enslaved, filling the empty, and honoring the humble.

have furthered liberation in some way, then we look again at our changed context and begin the see-judge-act process anew. If our actions have not moved toward liberation, then we reevaluate our methods and the actions we have deemed appropriate based on our judgment of God's voice to us through Scripture and the Holy Spirit.

Within the question of whether our actions have been liberative, there is another that is of utmost importance for *gringos/as* engaged in praxis: Have we remained an alternative political body, or have we lost sight of our otherness and played into the hands of Empire? There is a risk when we take a stand against political, social, and economic systems that we end up standing exactly where those powers would have us. Namely, our actions might end up serving the interests of either the ideological left or right more than the interests of *Jesús'* liberating mission. The problem with this is that the left and the right are but two sides of the imperial coin—they both bear Caesar's image.

I suspect that those who are pursuing a liberative praxis in our society are more tempted by the political left than they are by the right. At first glance, it may appear that liberals' calls for equality, resistance to the status quo, affirmative action, reparations for the oppressed, total freedom of will, etc. reflect *Jesús'* mission of liberation in the world. However, if we think that by taking up the liberal political agenda we are resisting the forces of Empire, then we are mistaken. While there may be liberating aspects to the liberal agenda in America, it should not be confused with the mission of *Jesús*. *Jesús* was not killed for being a liberal; he was killed for threatening the entire order of society. The left is simply one hand of Empire, and it takes two hands to nail a rebel to a cross. Therefore, to follow *Jesús* is not to become liberal. Christian praxis is not about choosing a side—left versus right—but choosing a different game altogether. To follow *Jesús*

means to prophetically denounce Empire (and both of its hands) and to make real the possibility of an alternative political body called the church. Whatever actions we take within the present political structures (protesting, voting, lobbying, etc.) may be necessary, but must always be recognized as incomplete. The goal, after all, is not so much to reform Empire, but to embody its alternative—the kingdom (or “kin-dom”) of *Jesús*.

In order to accurately discern whether we have maintained our alternative identity while attempting liberative actions, we need the church—the whole church—to help us reflect upon our actions. I emphasize “the whole church” because multiple perspectives are necessary if an honest appraisal of our actions is to be given. It is not enough for *gringos/as* to look to our white congregations for affirmation of our actions. The praxis reflection community must be a multiethnic, multicultural, multi-class one in order to maintain the alternativeness of the *familia de Jesús* as we take action in the world. This means that multicultural churches are necessary (or, at the very least, a degree of ecumenicalism is needed) for praxis to remain effective and faithful to *Jesús*’ mission. *Gringos/as* engaged in liberative praxis will need our nonwhite brothers and sisters to help us see where our actions are lacking—where our actions reflect a colonized conscience more than a liberated one. We will need help identifying where our actions have been counterproductive, where we have failed to act altogether, and where we might more effectively resist the powers of exclusion and oppression. Following *Jesús*, as it turns out, cannot be done without a community—a *familia*—surrounding us. We need one another as we make the journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, and it is when we reach

Jerusalem that we need each other more than ever so that we are not recaptured by the forces of Empire.

**Conclusion:  
Continuing the *Camino***

This thesis project began in a small Mexican restaurant in the Central Valley of California. It then journeyed to Galilee, crossed borders to the plain upon which *Jesús* brought together a new people, then along the *camino* to Jerusalem, and ultimately back to confront the American empire. It is my hope that we return from this journey with eyes that more clearly see the powers that have controlled so much of our lives, hands that are linked with those of our Latino/a *hermanos y hermanas* as we communally do the work of theology, and imaginations that are now freer to consider an alternative allegiance and creative actions that resist all forces of oppression and exclusion. It is also my hope that the journey would not stop here. Just as the Latino/a theological method is a cyclical one, the *camino* laid out in this project is meant to recurrently lead us out from where we are, to meet *Jesús* in the borderlands and commune with his people, then return us to our starting point energized with a clear vision of liberative praxis.

In Section I, I examined the Latino/a theological method (chapter one) and surveyed Latino/a Christologies (chapter two). This section laid the foundation for understanding Latino/a Christology so that I could then engage *Jesús* as someone who comes to him from a non-Latino/a context. In Section II, I developed this idea as an open-border Christology and proposed its soteriological implications. Chapter three focused on making clear the need that white Americans have for a savior who is Other—one who comes from outside our power and status structures. Here I cast the vision for an open-border Christology and described three effects that ultimately lead to salvation for *gringos/as*. In chapter four I attempted to follow the see-judge-act methodology as I interpreted *Jesús*' Sermon on the Plain as a liberative text for *gringos/as*. Finally, in

chapter five I explored what a liberative praxis might look like for white Americans finding themselves caught between a society that privileges them and a savior who privileges the poor.

The *camino* I have traced through this thesis is in many ways a very personal one. It is the *camino* I have tried to traverse over the last few years of my life. Yet I hope that I have presented it here in such a way that it might be extended to reach those in other contexts as well. That is, the concept of an open-border Christology is one that can be applied to other intercontextual dialogues as well. While my focus here was *Jesús*, the Latino/a liberator, I suppose that I could have written something similar relating to the Jesus of black liberation theology, the Jesus of Native American theology, the Jesus of womanist theology, etc. Wherever there is a postcolonial theology, there is something to be learned by white Christians about the Jesus of that theology. Integrating a nonwhite Christ into one's theological framework through an open-border approach makes possible the same three soteriological effects I laid out in chapter three: identities flare, cultures mix, and a new creation is birthed. The result of opening our borders to postcolonial Christologies is (if we can get past the flaring of our identities) always new creation. Whenever we open our theological borders to a Christ who is "other," not only do we begin to imagine Jesus in a new way, but we are invited down a new discipleship journey that will change the way we read the words of Jesus in Scripture, the way we relate to our nonwhite brothers and sisters in the church, and the ways in which we enact our allegiance to the kingdom of God.

Liberation, as it turns out, is for everyone. Not only are those who are oppressed and exploited by our society in need of *Jesús'* liberation, but we who possess power and



privilege need his liberation as well. In fact, we also need our nonwhite brothers and sisters—those who have already met *Jesús* in Galilee and on the plain—to introduce us to *Jesús* and to lead us in confronting the powers that have held us captive. For there is liberation, even for *gringos/as*, if we only open our borders to meet *Jesús*.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bartlett, David L. "The Beatitudes." *Journal for Preachers* 40, no. 2 (2017): 13–19.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *The Prophetic Imagination*. Second Edition. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001.
- "City of Kerman." *Demographics*, May 2018. <http://cityofkerman.net/demographics/>.
- Conde-Frazier, Elizabeth. "From Hospitality to Shalom." In *A Many Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation*, by Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, S. Steve Kang, and Gary A. Parrett, 167–210. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004.
- Conde-Frazier, S. Steve Kang, and Gary A. Parrett. *A Many Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004.
- Costas, Orlando E. *Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2005.
- De La Torre, Miguel A. "Constructing a Cuban-Centric Christ." In *Jesus in the Hispanic Community: Images of Christ from Theology to Popular Religion*, 58–73. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.
- . *The Politics of Jesús: A Hispanic Political Theology*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.
- Dyrness, William A. *Learning about Theology from the Third World*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990.
- Elizondo, Virgilio. *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise*. Revised Edition. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos. 30th Anniversary Edition. New York: Herder and Herder, 2010.
- González, Justo L. *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990.
- . *Santa Biblia: The Bible Through Hispanic Eyes*. First Edition. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.
- . "Scripture, Tradition, Experience, and Imagination: A Redefinition." In *The Ties That Bind: African American and Hispanic American/Latino/a Theology in Dialogue*, edited by Anthony B. Pinn and Benjamin Valentin, 61–73. New York: Continuum, 2001.

- Gorman, Michael J. *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009.
- Green, Gene L. "A Response to the Postcolonial Roundtable: Promises, Problems and Prospects." edited by Kay Higuera Smith, Jayachitra Lalitha, and Daniel L. Hawk, 19–24. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014.
- Green, Joel B. "Good News to the Poor: A Lukan Leitmotif." *Review & Expositor* 111, no. 2 (May 2014): 173–79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034637314524374>.
- . *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Guerra, Gilbert, and Gilbert Orbea. "The Argument Against the Use of the Term 'Latinx.'" *The Phoenix* (blog), November 19, 2015. <http://swarthmorephoenix.com/2015/11/19/the-argument-against-the-use-of-the-term-latinx/>.
- Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History Politics and Salvation*. Translated by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973.
- Isasi-Díaz, Ada María, and Eduardo Mendieta, eds. *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/fresnopac-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3239612>.
- Isasi-Díaz, Ada María. *En La Lucha (In the Struggle): Elaborating a Mujerista Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004.
- . "Kin-Dom of God: A Mujerista Proposal." In *In Our Own Voices: Latino/a Renditions of Theology*, 171–89, 2010.
- . "Mujerista Discourse: A Platform for Latinas' Subjugated Knowledge." In *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy*, edited by Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta, 44–67. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012.
- Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.
- Jennings, Willie James. "Overcoming Racial Faith." *Divinity Magazine* 14, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 5–9.
- . *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.
- Kim, Simon C. *An Immigration of Theology: Theology of Context as the Theological Method of Virgilio Elizondo and Gustavo Gutiérrez*. Eugene: Pickwick, 2012.

- Lee, Michael Edward. "The Galilean Jesus as Faithful Dissenter: Latino/a Christology and the Dynamics of Exclusion." In *Jesus in the Hispanic Community: Images of Christ from Theology to Popular Religion*, 16–37. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.
- Lozano, Gilberto, and Federico A. Roth. "The Problem and Promise of Praxis in Postcolonial Criticism." In *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations: Global Awakenings in Theology and Praxis*, edited by Kay Higuera Smith, Jayachitra Lalitha, and Daniel L. Hawk, 183–96. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014.
- Martell-Otero, Loida I. "Encuentra Con El Jesús Sato: An Evangélica Soter-Ology." In *Jesus in the Hispanic Community: Images of Christ from Theology to Popular Religion*, edited by Harold J. Recinos and Hugo Magallenes, 74–91. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.
- . "From Satas to Santas: Sobrajas No More: Salvation in the Spaces of the Everyday." In *Latinas Evangélicas: A Theological Survey from the Margins*, by Loida I. Martell-Otero, Zaida Maldonado Pérez, and Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, 33–51. Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013.
- McLaren, Brian. "Why Postcolonial Conversations Matter: Reflections on Postcolonial Friendship." In *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations: Global Awakenings in Theology and Praxis*, edited by Kay Higuera Smith, Jayachitra Lalitha, and Daniel L. Hawk, 13–15. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014.
- Pedraja, Luis G. "Doing Christology in Spanish." *Theology Today* 54, no. 4 (January 1998): 453–63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004057369805400402>.
- . "Doing Theology in Spanish: Hispanic Theological Methodology, Dialogue, and Rationality." In *Hispanic Christian Thought at the Dawn of the 21st Century: Apuntes in Honor of Justo L. González*, edited by Alvin Padilla, Roberto Goizueta, and Eldin Villafaña, 168–75. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005.
- . *Jesus Is My Uncle: Christology from a Hispanic Perspective*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999.
- Recinos, Harold J., and Magallenes, eds. *Jesus in the Hispanic Community: Images of Christ from Theology to Popular Religion*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.
- Rivera, Luis R. "El Cristo Migrante/The Migrant Christ." In *Jesus in the Hispanic Community: Images of Christ from Theology to Popular Religion*, edited by Harold J. Recinos and Hugo Magallenes, 135–54. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.
- Shorrocks, Anthony, Jim Davies, and Rodrigo Lluberas. "Global Wealth Report." Credit Suisse Research Institute, October 2018.

Smith, Kay Higuera, Jayachitra Lalitha, and Daniel L. Hawk, eds. *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations: Global Awakenings in Theology and Praxis*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014.

Volf, Miroslav. *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.

Yoder, John Howard. "The Meaning of the Constantinian Shift." In *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution*, edited by Theodore J. Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker, 57–74. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009.