My Journey with Liberation Theology

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This article reflects on a fifty-year journey with Latin American liberation theology from the time I was a seminary student at Wartburg Theological Seminary to my present engagement. I write to honor and give thanks to God for my colleagues, Javier Alanis and José David Rodríguez, for their lifetime contributions to Latiné ministry and the mission of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

First encounters

My introduction to the thought of Latin American liberation theology took place in the classroom of Dr. William Streng—whose name graces the chair I hold at Wartburg Theological Seminary—in a course on Christian education. One assignment in the course was to write short book reviews. At the recommendation of Dr. Streng I first read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator and philosopher, whose work taught me about "the view from below." In his literacy program, Freire developed a pedagogy that privileged the life experiences, culture, and aspirations of oppressed people. This contextualization of the educational process was a revelation to me about teaching—and doing theology—from the underside of history.

Upon reading my review, Dr. Streng recommended a second book, *A Theology of Liberation*, by Gustavo Gutiérrez. This book had only appeared in English translation in 1973 after its original Spanish publication in 1971. Dr. Streng was a keen observer of theological trends and recently published literature. Gutiérrez is credited with first coining the term, liberation theology (*teología de liberación*), in a lecture given in 1968.[1] That was the same year that James H. Cone first employed the term liberation theology to describe black theology in the U.S. I did not realize then how these two books would change the course of my career.

One primary learning from Gutiérrez was the provocative assertion that the interlocuter for doing theology in Latin America was the "nonperson," the one "who is not recognized as such by the existing social order."[2] Gutiérrez contrasted this starting point with the character of academic theology which aims to make theology credible to the "nonbeliever." The point of departure for Latin American liberation theology is not the question of meaning or unbelief as with modern academic theology. Rather, it is the lived experience of poverty for those oppressed by the wealth disparity of the global economy. This is what made liberation theology "a *new way* to do theology."[3] It was from Gutiérrez that I was introduced to the crucial matter of "orthopraxis" as the standard of theology, not only orthodoxy.[4]

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In Germany

When I unexpectedly received the opportunity in 1982 to move

1. John Ronald Blue, "Origins of Gustavo Gutiérrez' 'A Theology of Liberation'" (PhD dissertation). Arlington, Texas: University of Texas at Arlington, 1989. The lecture was titled, "*Hacia una teología de la liberación*" ("Toward a theology of liberation").

2. Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Faith as Freedom: Solidarity with the Alienated and Confidence in the Future," *Horizons* 2 (Spring 1975): 43.

3. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, Orbis, 1973), 15.

4. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 10. Edward Schillebeeckx commented: "But the Church has for centuries devoted her attention to formulating truths and meanwhile did almost nothing to better the world. In other words, the Church focused on orthodoxy and left orthopraxis in the hands of nonmembers and nonbelievers."

to Germany, serve as an assistant to Prof. Hans Schwarz at the University of Regensburg, and complete my doctoral studies at the University of Munich, the question soon arose about the topic of my dissertation. Unlike doctoral programs in the U.S., the first step was to complete the thesis and only then to undertake examinations. Upon careful reflection, I concluded that the most important and innovative development in contemporary theology was the emergence of Latin American liberation theology. This was a topic worthy of my time and energy, for which I had passion to devote four years of my life to research and writing. To this day, I have never regretted that decision. It has decisively shaped the trajectory of my pastoral and academic work.

I developed a thesis outline and shared the proposal first with Prof. Schwarz. Although this was not his specialization, much to his credit he accepted the topic and encouraged me to take the proposal to the faculty in Munich, with whom the dissertation oversight would be shared. I was excited about the possibility of working with Prof. Wolfhart Pannenberg and set an appointment to meet with him about it. The earliest available date was in spring 1983, three months after my initial inquiry.

My meeting with Prof. Pannenberg proved shocking. After a cursory look at my outline, he asked me when and how I was going to refute liberation theology. When I explained that my purpose was to offer a balanced approach that examined both the strengths and limitations of liberation theology, Pannenberg abruptly ended the conversation, making clear he had no interest in this topic. Only later did I learn about his intellectual critique and opposition to liberation theology due to the influence of Marxist thought. I returned from Munich to Regensburg shaken and dispirited, wondering whether and how I could continue.

Prof. Schwarz also had a difficult time processing the reception from Pannenberg. After some time to regather myself, and by the arrangement of Prof. Schwarz, I next had a meeting with Prof. Trutz Rendtorff, the other systematic theologian and an ethicist on the Protestant faculty in Munich. I am deeply grateful to Prof. Rendtorff for agreeing to serve as partner in overseeing my dissertation in Munich. In the course of my studies, I received his invitation to participate in an *Oberseminar* that met in his home one evening per week for a semester. Rendtorff's hospitality, academic wisdom, and support were indispensable for completing my degree in Munich.

The dissertation was presented to and accepted by the Protestant Theological Faculty of the Ludwig Maximilian University at Munich in December 1985 with the title, "The North American Theological Response to Latin American Liberation Theology: Validity and Limitations of a Praxis-Oriented Theology." It included seven chapters organized into three major parts: 1) Descriptive Analysis of Latin American Liberation Theology, 2) Responses of North American Theologians to Latin American Liberation Theology, and 3) Critical Analysis.

Chapter Three examined seven resonant responses: Richard Shaull, James Cone, Frederick Herzog, Robert McAfee Brown, Rosemary Radford Ruether, three evangelical affirmations (Ronald J. Sider, Jim Wallis, and Alfred C. Krass), and the Theology in the Americas process. After analyzing critical responses in Chapter Four by theologians that included Michael Novak, Robert Benne, Dennis P. McCann, Richard John Neuhaus, Carl E. Braaten, Donald Bloesch, Daniel L. Migliore, Peter C. Hodgson, John B. Cobb, Jr., and Schubert M. Ogden, I named seven critical arguments at issue in the "Intercontinental Theological Disputation" over Latin American liberation theology. These included liberation theology's use of Marxist thought, the defense of democratic capitalism, the challenges of Christian realism, use of the term kingdom of God, the question about exegesis, evangelical critiques, and proposals for more adequate conceptuality.

I affirmed the validity of liberation theology on three strong grounds related to its rootedness in the Christian tradition, the Latin American plausibility structure, and the insufficiency of an academic theology in that context.

In my conclusion, there were four limitations requiring clarification from Latin American liberation theologians: 1) the philosophical basis, 2) theological method, 3) theological anthropology, and 4) the concept of liberation. Nevertheless, I affirmed the validity of liberation theology on three strong grounds related to its rootedness in the Christian tradition, the Latin American plausibility structure, and the insufficiency of an academic theology in that context. "According to both its own formulations in the Latin American context and according to a critical evaluation of the North American responses, liberation theology can be affirmed as a valid and significant theological option."[5]

Regarding the Latin American plausibility structure and the insufficiency of academic theology in that context, I wrote these closing lines:

> On numerous occasions those North American theologians, missionaries, clergy, and lay persons who have immersed themselves in the Latin American context and who have experienced firsthand the situation of the Latin American poor have come to a new understanding of the validity of Latin American liberation theology. To those who have not yet been able to envision the context to which liberation theology seeks to respond, liberation theologians extend the invitation for them to

5. Craig L. Nessan, *Orthopraxis or Heresy: The North American Theological Response to Latin American Liberation Theology* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 401-402.

come and see for themselves.[6]

This conclusion speaks to the limited imagination by many to conceive of this new theological departure and encourages recognition of liberation theology as the most innovative and needful theological development in the late twentieth century.

Five of the seven chapters of the dissertation were published as a book by Scholars Press in 1989 with the title, *Orthopraxis or Heresy: The North American Theological Response to Latin American Liberation Theology*. The remaining two chapters appeared in my subsequent book, *The Vitality of Liberation Theology*, in 2012. That book was written at a time when questions were being raised about the death of liberation theology. In defense of its signal importance not only for the history but also the future of theology, I wrote:

> What we today call World Christianity in many ways found its first potent voice crying out from Latin America . . . Soon 'contextual' theologies, advocating social equality and economic justice, emerged across the continents, wherever Christian people began to read the Bible through liberation lenses: Anti-apartheid theology in South Africa and Namibia, *Minjung* theology in Korea, *Dalit* theology in India, and Palestinian liberation theology . . . The dawn of Latin American liberation theology inaugurated a new era in the global theological landscape.[7]

Moreover, in North America and Europe, the contributions of Latin American liberation theology have transformed the practice of systematic theology in decisive ways. Theologians can no longer do their work without recognizing the contextual nature of their own perspectives.[8] The methodology of liberation theology has challenged all theologians to acknowledge the contextualization of their own work. Furthermore, through liberation theology the reality of suffering as a starting point for doing theology also has gained prominence.[9]

Liberating Lutheran theology

One major interest has examined the relationship between liberation theology and Lutheran theology. My earliest publication on Latin American liberation theology appeared in *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* in 1986 with the title, "Liberation Praxis: Challenge to Lutheran Theology."[10] This was written in response to an article by Carl E. Braaten, the journal editor, who had described praxis as "the Trojan horse of liberation theology." Braaten, like Pannenberg, had identified praxis in liberation theology with Marxism.

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In the article, I explained praxis as the very method of liberation theology and defended its biblical warrants. I referenced the work of Gustavo Gutiérrez, Juan Luis Segundo, and José Miguez-Bonino to demonstrate other meanings of praxis and a differentiated approach to Marxism. While some liberation theologians did employ elements of Marxist social analysis, this was in service to understanding systemic poverty in the Latin American context, not an ideological position. Rather than a Trojan horse, liberation theology serves as "a genuine challenge to Lutheran theology" and a reminder "of the global context in which we do theology today which is tragically characterized by hunger and starvation."[11]

Collaborative work with Paul Chung and Ulrich Duchrow led to the publication in 2011 of our book, *Liberating Lutheran Theology: Freedom for Justice and Solidarity in Global Context*. My major focus in this project was to build on Duchrow's reinterpretation of Luther's two kingdoms teaching as a constructive paradigm for Lutheran ethics in North America.[12]

One chief problem with traditional interpretations of the two kingdoms is that separating the spiritual (right hand) kingdom from the civil (left hand) kingdom has led to political quietism on the part of the Lutheran church. This was demonstrated dramatically during the church struggle against Nazism as reflected in the famous quote from Martin Niemöller:

> First, they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist.
>
> Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist.
>
> Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.
>
> Then they came for me—and there was no one left to

6. Nessan, *Orthopraxis or Heresy*, 412.

7. Craig L. Nessan, *The Vitality of Liberation Theology* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick, 2012), xii-xv.

8. Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Politics and Theology: Unraveling Empire for a Global* World (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2021).

9. Craig L. Nessan, "Thine Is the Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: New Vistas for the Theology of the Cross," *Dialog* 50 (Spring 2011): 81-89.

10. Craig L. Nessan, "Liberation Praxis: Challenge to Lutheran Theology," *Dialog* 25 (Spring 1986):124-128.

11. Nessan, "Liberation Praxis," 128. In addition to publishing my article, Braaten sent me a personal letter.

12. Ulrich Duchrow, *Christenheit Und Weltverantwortung: Traditionsgeschichte und Systematische Struktur der Zweireichelehre* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1970).

speak for me.[13]

Dietrich Bonhoeffer issued an urgent criticism of two realms thinking in his *Ethics*, insisting there is "only one reality" in Jesus Christ and not allowing the civil realm to be viewed as autonomous.[14] In the U.S. the conflation of the two kingdoms with a misunderstanding of separation of church and state has had the same chilling effects.

Rather than understanding Luther's teaching according to the spatial metaphor of "kingdom," I proposed translating the German word *Regiment* as "strategy." Whereas thinking of God's "two kingdoms" leads to their separation into a spiritual realm belonging to the church and a civil realm belonging to government, we can better imagine that God can operate according to two strategies at the same time, working dynamically in both realms. In the right-hand strategy, God liberates us from sin by the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and sets us free for serving neighbors in the left-hand strategy. God is ambidextrous, bringing salvation according to the right hand and shalom according to the left hand, coordinating our participation in both.

Liberating Lutheran Theology further demonstrates the influence of Latin American liberation theology on systematic theology in Europe and North America. In Europe, the work of Jürgen Moltmann, Hans Schwarz, and Georg Kraus provide evidence of the impact, as do the work of Douglas John Hall, Donald Bloesch, and David Tracy in North America. These are examples that could have been expanded with reference to many others. "Latin American liberation theology helped to catalyze the emergence of contextual theologies in many other parts of the world so that doing theology contextually now characterizes the practice of theology in a global era."[15]

In the years leading to the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017, I was involved in the leadership team for the movement "Radicalizing Reformation" in partnership with theologians from across the world. In a series of international conferences and publications, this movement aimed to draw attention to Reformation theology's contributions to peace, justice, and the integrity of creation. Seven volumes of research were published, for which I served as an editor of two volumes.[16]

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This movement articulated 94 Theses— "Provoked by the Bible and Today's Crises"—to provide an alternative hermeneutic for the ongoing significance of the Reformation inheritance in the contemporary global context.

> We are theologians – predominantly Lutheran but also Reformed, Methodist, Anglican, and Mennonite – from different parts of the world, who are involved in an ongoing project of reconsidering the biblical roots and contemporary challenges facing Reformation theology today. The rampant destruction of human and non-human life in a world ruled by the totalitarian dictatorship of money and greed, market and exploitation requires a radical re-orientation towards the biblical message, which also marked the beginning of the Reformation.[17]

My own focus in this formulation was on theses 47-57 under the section heading, "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matthew 5:9)." Thesis 48 reads: "We call for conversion to the praxis of peacemaking (Isaiah 2:2-4). The way of peacemaking, as embodied by Jesus, joins God's nonviolent praxis with the cause of all those who practice nonviolence. Nonviolent praxis is a sign of God's reign of shalom (Isaiah 11:6-9)."[18] The section ends with thesis 57: "Practicing peace means being dedicated to the common life of all in a political community that is uniquely characterized by peaceful practices. Practicing peace means following the consequences of this conviction, being realistic with regard to one's own

13. Martin Niemöller, "First They Came For…", *Holocaust Encyclopedia,* United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/martin-niemoeller-first-they-came-for-the-socialists Accessed 9 June 2024.

14. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, in Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 6, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 57-62.

15. Craig L. Nessan, "Orthopraxis and Martyrdom: The Influence of Latin American Liberation Theology on Systematic Theology in Europe and the United States," in Paul Chung, Ulrich Duchrow, and Craig L. Nessan, *Liberating Lutheran Theology: Freedom for Justice and Solidarity in a Global Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 67.

16. Ulrich Duchrow and Craig L. Nessan, eds, *Liberation from Violence for Life in Peace*, Radicalizing Reformation vol. 4 (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2015) and Karen L. Bloomquist, Craig L. Nessan, and Hans G. Ulrich, eds., *Radicalizing Reformation: North American Perspectives*, Radicalizing Reformation vol. 6 (Zűrich: Lit Verlag, 2016).

17. "94 Theses: Provoked by the Bible and Today's Crises," Radicalizing Reformation (2017), https://ulrich-duchrow.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/94-Theses-final-Radicalizing-Reformation.pdf

18. Cf. Craig L. Nessan, *Shalom Church: The Body of Christ as Ministering Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), chap. 4.

responsibility, because only by doing so will peace prevail in the world (Matt 5:43-48)." The only way to lasting peace is through change attained through nonviolent direct action.

My own research at the time of the 500th Reformation observance engaged the scandal of Luther's stance against the Jews, peasants, and Anabaptists. This was my reckoning with three tragic cases from the theological ethics of Martin Luther, arguing that Luther's devolution into "religious identity politics" misled him to horrific conclusions, whose consequences continue to plague the world centuries later. Rather than arguing for their protection under the laws of society according to "neighbor politics," Luther resorted to religious rhetoric and appeals to violence that continues to do harm.

Documenting Luther's writings, I argued that Luther not only exempted these three sets of opponents from the neighbor love commanded by God but engaged in religious identity politics that demonized them for their religious convictions and consequently engaged in eliminationist rhetoric and proposals:

> Only by deconstructing the logic of religious identity politics, both then and now, can Luther's ethical framework be reconstructed in service of a neighbor politics that has its sole purpose in defending the weak from harm and safeguarding the welfare of the most vulnerable in society, regardless of their religious convictions.[19]

A revised portion of this chapter appeared as the article, "Luther against the Jews: Repudiating a Reformation Legacy," during the 2017 observance of the Reformation in *Tikkun Magazine*.[20] These lines of research each follow the methodology of liberation theology that begins with the experiences of the suffering ones.

Liberation method and cries of the suffering ones

On this journey, the most enduring learning involves the impact of the method that emerged from Latin American liberation theology.[21] I consider the method of liberation theologies to be oriented toward praxis, therefore constructive also for the practice of ethics. Crucially, the starting point for liberation method is the cries of the suffering ones in society and the cries of creation.

The method first employed in Latin American liberation theology has been adapted for many other expressions of liberation theology across the world. Each of these has particular forms of suffering as their point of departure. In the case of Latin America, the form of suffering that generated the movement involved poverty and economic oppression, the disparity of wealth between

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those in centers of economic privilege and those struggling to survive on the periphery.[22]

Liberation theologies in general include five constitutive elements of method: 1) identification with particular forms of oppression and suffering, 2) prophetic critique of that condition, 3) social analysis of the causes of oppression and suffering, 4) biblical and theological engagement to address that suffering and overcome oppression, and 5) advocacy of structural change toward a greater approximation of justice. Liberation theologies engage in focused reflection upon experiences of suffering and oppression in which these five elements interact dynamically in relation to specific populations, historical experiences, and particular contexts.[23]

In an article titled "Liberation Theologies in America" in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*, I introduced seven types of liberation theology in North America: Black liberation theology, Feminist theologies, Womanist theologies, Latina/o and Mujerista theologies, Native American liberation theologies, LGBTQ+ liberation theologies, and Ecojustice theologies. Each expression of liberation theology in North America incorporates in specific ways these five elements of liberation method (as do expressions of liberation theology in other global contexts).

Black liberation theology, for example, originated in response to white racism in the U.S. as black theologians began to reflect critically on Christian theology in light of black experiences of suffering and oppression. Social analysis has been undertaken to examine the changing shapes of systemic racism throughout American history from the periods of enslavement, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, lynching, segregation, mass incarceration, and regressive policies by states that legislate black inequality under the law. At stake in black liberation theology is the full humanity, dignity, participation, and equal treatment of black people, including education, access to public accommodations, voting rights, employment, housing, health care, legal rights, political

19. Nessan, "Beyond Luther to Ethical Reformation: Peasants, Anabaptists, Jews," in Bloomquist, Nessan, and Ulrich, eds., *Radicalizing Reformation*, chap. 4.

20. Craig L. Nessan, "Luther against the Jews: Repudiating a Reformation Legacy," *Tikkun* 32 (Summer 2017):34-38.

21. One extensive treatment is Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2009).

22. Nessan, *Orthopraxis or Heresy*, 19-28.

23. Cf. Craig L. Nessan, "Liberation Theologies in America," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia* (Dec 19, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.493

representation, entitlement programs, and social security.

In every instance, these diverse expressions of liberation theology begin from a particular form of suffering, whether of marginalized groups or creation itself. Accordingly, I have begun teaching each academic year two research seminars on American Genocide. The focus is on black history and theology in the spring semesters and on indigenous history and theology in the fall semesters. These seminars have allowed me, together with students, to read and discuss significant works and to engage in research through the lens of genocide theory.

Each of the five characteristics of genocide identified by the United Nations and interpreted as "eliminationism" by Daniel Jonah Goldhagen are recognizable in this history.[24]

> The path to right remembering must pass through acts of public confession, truth telling in public education materials, and correction of the historical record through memorials and monuments that revise the distortions that have been perpetuated for generations. This work requires intentional effort and must be carried out with persistence over the next generations. America must engage in a sustained process of truth telling, if we are to make amends for the crimes committed against indigenous and enslaved peoples and rectify the distortions embedded for generations in a false historical narrative.[25]

The tangled web of American history requires analysis, prophetic critique, and deconstruction as it erases from memory atrocities committed against both indigenous people and the enslaved people from Africa.[26] We need to call the thing what it is—Genocide! —and engage in confession, repentance, and reparations.

My teaching, research, and writing have given attention to two other acute forms of suffering demanding attention. The first are the cries of creation. In recent years I have begun to offer courses on Ecojustice as part of the seminary curriculum. My co-teachers in this effort have included Lisa Dahill, Larry Rasmussen, and Man-Hei Yip. Ecojustice advocates for the well-being of earth's biosphere against multiple threats to the ecological sustainability of the planet caused by human interventions eroding and destroying the very conditions that make life possible. A theology of shalom, by contrast, entails life-giving relationships between God, humans, all creatures, and the earth. We participate in God's "mending the earth" (*tikkun olam*) as we learn to live responsibly in accordance with the goodness of natural processes.

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The second acute form of suffering requiring urgent attention involves the cries of children. After years of engaging liberation themes, I was flabbergasted to recognize the failure of liberation theologies adequately to engage the suffering of children. This provoked me to advocate the recovery and development of child liberation theology.

> Child liberation theology deserves its own rightful place as a central, if not primary, vantage point for engaging in the method of liberation theology. The suffering and oppression of children cries out for advocacy, insofar as the experiences of childhood mark and mar their very identity and being for the remainder of life.[27]

Collaboration with Victor I. Vieth and Marcia J. Bunge has led to additional research and publication on matters related to child liberation theology.[28] With these colleagues and in partnership with my ethics students, we launched an effort for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) to develop a social statement on child abuse and child protection.[29] In 2024, the ELCA Church Council did authorize the development of a social message on the topic of child protection and maltreatment. Advocacy continues in earnest for the safety and wellbeing of children in the spirit of child liberation theology.

24. United Nations, Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.1_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf and Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Worse Than War: Genocide, Eliminationism, and the Ongoing Assault on Humanity* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008), 14-18.

25. Craig L. Nessan, "Calling a Thing What It Is: Confronting the American Genocide of Indigenous Peoples," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 47 (Jan 2020): 26.

26. Craig L. Nessan, "Disposable People and the Death of White-god," *Dialog* 60 (Fall 2021): 177-184.

27. Craig L. Nessan, "Child Liberation Theology," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 45 (July 2018): 7.

28. See Craig L. Nessan, "Attending to the Cries of Children in Liberation Theologies," in Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *Child Theology: Diverse Methods and Global Perspectives* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2021), 1-20; and two theme issues in the *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*, vol. 23 (Dec 2023/Jan 2024) titled "Addressing the Sin of Child Abuse" and vol. 24 (April/May 2024) titled "Protecting Children: What Is the Role of the ELCA?" https://learn.elca.org/jle/issues/

29. Craig L. Nessan, ed., "Rationale for a Social Statement on Child Abuse and Child Protection," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 48 (April 2021): 43-56.

Our Lady of Guadalupe

The first observance of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the Loehe Chapel at Wartburg Theological Seminary took place on December 6, 2019. The Feast Day for Our Lady of Guadalupe is observed on December 12; she is recognized in the Roman Catholic calendar of saints as Patroness of the Americas. In December 1531, the "Lady from Heaven" appeared to Juan Diego, a poor Indian from Tepeyac, at a hill northwest of Mexico City. She identified herself as the Mother of the True God and instructed him to have the Bishop build a church on that site, leaving an image of herself imprinted miraculously on his tilma, a garment of poor-quality cactus-cloth.

For centuries after the Reformation, devotion to Mary became a matter of division stressing the difference between Roman Catholics and Protestants. With the advances of the ecumenical movement[30] and due to Mary's intrinsic significance for Christian faith, including her place in the historic Creeds, it is time for Lutherans to reclaim observance of Mary, the Mother of God,[31] as a witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, including her appearance as Our Lady of Guadalupe.[32]

I offer here four compelling reasons for Lutheran Christians to recover devotion to Mary as belonging to our tradition and, in particular, to introduce observance of Our Lady of Guadalupe: 1) to indigenize the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Americas among Latiné people, 2) to honor Mary's witness to the Gospel as a disciple of Jesus, 3) to communicate the message of justification by grace through faith through the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and 4) to recognize how the liberating message of Mary accords with Luther's freedom of the Gospel.

As we consider how God chooses to *indigenize divine presence* among us, we affirm the translatability of the Christian Scripture and Christian message into every human language and culture at all times and places.[33] In the early church we note how the Christian message was transformed in addressing the milieu of the Roman Empire and Greek-influenced ethos. We remember and celebrate how Martin Luther translated the Bible and Christian message into the German vernacular to enliven Christian faith in that context. We know how the Bible has been and continues to be translated into other languages and how the Christian faith is transformed through creative exchanges in diverse contexts.

The appearance of Mary as an indigenous peasant woman has welcomed Latiné people to receive the Gospel message of Jesus Christ in alignment with Hispanic cultures. The image of Our Lady of Guadalupe within sanctuaries, homes, and neighborhoods affirms the translatability of the Christian message in the Americas and helps transcend the barriers created through colonial conquest and the harm done by missionaries working within the colonial system.

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We count John the Baptist as a witness who prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah. In the famous image from the Isenheim Altar, John appears with an elongated index finger pointing to the Crucified Jesus. John the Baptist points to the coming of the Lord. With Mary we experience an even more intimate *witness to Jesus Christ*. Mary's elongated womb points in every direction to the fullness of God's incarnation in human flesh.

Mary as *Theotokos*, the Mother of God, serves as the paradigmatic witness to Jesus Christ: by her conceiving, her birthing, her magnificent song, her child rearing, her relationship, her devotion, her grieving, and her testimony to Jesus Christ as God's Son. Mary witnesses to both the humanity and divinity of Jesus by her mothering and her discipleship. As she proclaimed to the servants at the wedding in Cana: "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5).

Our Lady of Guadalupe has made a profound impact on Christian faith in the Americas since her appearance in the sixteenth century during Luther's own lifetime. Luther celebrated the witness of Mary in his commentary on the Magnificat:

> From this we may learn how to show her the honor and devotion that are her due. How ought one to address her? Keep these words in mind, and they will teach you to say, 'Oh Blessed Virgin, Mother of God, you were nothing and all despised; yet God in his grace regarded you and worked such great things in you. You were worthy of none of them, but the rich and abundant grace of God was upon you, far above any merit of yours. Hail to you! Blessed are you, from thence forth and forever, in finding such a God.' Nor need you fear that she will take it amiss if we call her unworthy of such grace. For, of a truth, she did not lie when she herself acknowledged her unworthiness and nothingness, which God

30. H. George Anderson, J. Francis Stafford, and Joseph A. Burgess, eds., *The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992).

31. See Matthew J. Milliner, *Mother of the Lamb: The Story of a Global Icon* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2022).

32. Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Virgin of Guadalupe: Theological Reflections of an Anglo-Lutheran Liturgist* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

33. Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact of Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989).

> regarded, not because of any merit in her, but solely by reason of his grace.[34]

Luther here acknowledges the humility of Mary, who is God's servant without merit on her part, a recipient of God's undeserved grace.

Maxwell E. Johnson writes about the compatibility between "the parable of Our Lady of Guadalupe" and Luther's insistence on *justification by grace through faith*. Even without the precise formulation, her message and witness accords with the Lutheran understanding that salvation comes to us as a gift of unconditional mercy and grace in Jesus Christ.

> For, like the parables of Jesus, the Virgin of Guadalupe, as a parable of the reign of God, is connected to the great biblical stories of reversal that point ultimately to the great reversal of the cross. Thus, the narrative and image of Gaudalupe belong, most appropriately, in close association with images of the Crucified One himself. For it is only in light of the image of Christ crucified that the meaning of Guadalupe is best revealed and appropriated.[35]

In parabolic representation, "…the Guadalupan narrative proclaims the unconditionally gracious, loving, merciful, and compassionate God who justifies the Juan Diegos, Juan Bernardinos, and Juan Zumárragas."[36]

Javier Alanis comments:

> In the Magnificat, Mary embodied for Luther a humble servant of God's unconditional love in Jesus Christ. In fact, Mary underscores for Luther a theologian of the cross who affirms the paradox of calling worthy what is unworthy and unworthy what is considered worthy through human eyes. Mary affirms a theology of grace that reveals our unrighteousness yet God's affirmation of God's people under the cross. It is in this light that we can read the narrative of the Guadalupe and affirm the "faith of the people."[37]

Justification by grace through faith in Christ alone echoes not only from Luther's reformation of the church but also from the message of Our Lady of Guadalupe that "functions as a concrete manifestation or cultural incarnation of the gospel message itself."[38]

Imagine how the Holy Spirit was working simultaneously in the first half of the sixteenth century to restore the liberating Gospel of Jesus Christ in two dramatically different cultural contexts. The Reformation of Luther in Germany and the parable of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico each employed *indigenous means to communicate the Gospel and liberate the people* from their bondage and oppression.

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José David Rodríguez writes:

> God's liberation of the poor and oppressed also calls for the liberation of the rich and mighty. The oppressed are not called to take vengeance on the powerful but to liberate them from their own violence. The humble are not raised to dominate over others but to get rid of all forms of domination. Slaves are not liberated to put others in bondage but to rid the world of slavery. God became human in the son of Mary to transform us from arrogant and selfish beings to true "humanized" beings … The story of the Virgin of Guadalupe is part of a broader story of the great saving acts of God in history. The good news for us is that we are invited to be a part of that wonderful and meaningful story.[39]

"To be sure, for Luther, Mary witnesses in the *Magnificat* to the power and wisdom of God manifested in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, grasped by faith, and stimulated by the Holy Spirit that works salvation for all creation."[40]

Given the dramatically changing demographics in the U.S., which include many siblings in Christ from Mexico, Central

34. Martin Luther, "The Magnificat" (1521), in *Luther's Works, vol. 21: The Sermon on the Mount and The Magnificat*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, trans. A.T. W. Steinhaeuser (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), 21:322.

35. Johnson, *The Virgin of Guadalupe*, 160-161.

36. Johnson, *The Virgin of Guadalupe*, 155.

37. Javier Alanis, "Luke 1:26-38 The Annunciation: A Sermon Study," https://jayalanis.com/luke-1-26-38-theannunciation-a-sermon-study/

38. Johnson, *The Virgin of Guadalupe*, 174.

39. José David Rodríguez Jr. with Colleen R. Nelson, "The Virgin of Guadalupe," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 13 (Dec. 1986): 369.

40. José David Rodríguez, "The Virgin of Guadalupe from a Latino/a Protestant Perspective," in Maxwell E. Johnson, ed., *American Magnificat: Protestants on Mary of Guadalupe* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2010), 133.

America, and South America, what would it mean for Lutheran congregations to observe this feast day and for our churches to be adorned with images of Our Lady of Guadalupe to indigenize the Christian faith? What could this mean as a sign of welcome, hospitality, and sanctuary by our congregations? Amazingly, the gathering area at the entryway into Fritschel Hall at Wartburg Theological Seminary is now named Our Lady of Guadelupe Commons with her image adorning the space!

Conclusion

Latin American liberation theology emerged in the 1960s to dramatically transform how we do theology in North America. This occurred at the same time that demographic trends demonstrate increasing diversity in the U.S. with the Hispanic population increasing from 5% in 1970 to 16% in 2010 to nearly 20% in 2024.[41] My journey with liberation theology coincides with these years of dramatic change for theology, church, and society.

The suffering caused by poverty as the starting point for Latin American liberation theology has given rise to other expressions of liberation theology, both in North America and globally, that begin with diverse forms of suffering and oppression.[42] More than anything else, it is the methodology of liberation theology beginning with experiences of suffering that has transformed my own work as a teaching theologian in the Lutheran tradition. This accords with Luther's assertion that the "theologian of the cross calls a thing what it is."[43]

It has been deeply meaningful to have colleagues who have deepened my comprehension of Latiné experiences in the Lutheran church and at the Borderlands of society.

It has been deeply meaningful to have colleagues who have deepened my comprehension of Latiné experiences in the Lutheran church and at the Borderlands of society. The scholarship of José David Rodríguez has shaped the conversation between Lutheran theology and Hispanic realities through his teaching and publishing career.[44] Javier Alanis served as my colleague through the Lutheran Seminary of the Southwest for more than 25 years, whose teaching about the Borderlands transformed students and faculty by engaging the history and experiences of Latiné people in that context.[45] I am grateful to God for the ways my journey with liberation theology and my vocation as a teaching theologian have been enriched through their contributions.

41. Jens Manuel Krogstad, Jeffrey S. Passel, Mohamad Moslimani, and Luis Noe-Bustamante, "Key Facts about U.S. Latinos for National Hispanic Heritage Month," Pew Research Center (Sept 22, 2023), https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/09/22/key-facts-about-us-latinos-for-national-hispanic-heritage-month/#:~:text=The%20U.S.%20Hispanic%20population%20reached,increase%20in%20the%20Asian%20population.

42. Cf. the discussion of method by Kwon Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Politics and Theology: Unraveling Empire for a Global World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2021), 8.

43. Martin Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation" (1518), in Timothy J. Wengert, ed., *The Roots of Reform: The Annotated Luther Vol. 1* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 84 (thesis 21).

44. Two of these contributions are José David Rodríguez and Loida I. Martell-Otero, eds., *Teologia en Conjunto: A Collaborative Hispanic Protestant Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997) and José David Rodríguez, *Caribbean Lutherans: The History of the Church in Puerto Rico* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2024).

45. For example, Javier Alanis, "Cruz-ando la Frontera (Cross-walking the Border)," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 45 (April 2018): 3-5, https://currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/article/view/115/136 and Javier Alanis, "The Walk to Emmaus or La Caminata a Emaús from Luke 24:13-35," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 50 (April 2023): 41-43, https://currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/article/view/407/436.