Reading the Bible from the Edges of Society

Dr. Justo L. González

Houston, Texas
March 2013

© Justo L. Gonzalez
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
info@aeth.org

Reading the Bible from the Edges of Society

Justo L. González

It is customary to begin a presentation such as this by declaring that one is honored. And, indeed, I am honored. But I am also surprised.

I grew up in a Protestant church in Latin America. As Protestants, we read theology in English. We read Bible commentaries in English. Unwittingly, but still in many ways, we were told that good theology came from the North Atlantic and was written either in English or in German. Practically all of it was written by white middle-class academic males in the North-Atlantic. So, it must be good! What we had to do was to read that good theology and find ways to translate and transpose it into our situation. I went to a seminary where over 90% of the books in the library were in English. My textbook on Church history made it appear that the apex of that history had been reached in the North Atlantic, and all we could do now was to live up to it.

AETH

Two surprising things have happened in the way from then to now. First, the world and the church have changed. The old margins have come to the center, and much of the old center has lost its vitality. What was once a one-way movement of ideas, resources, and teachings from the center to what was then called the mission field has now been reversed, at least in part, so that today in any good theological library here in the US you must have books translated from Spanish, from Korean, from Portuguese, and from Swahili. So, the first surprising change of the last fifty years is this cataclysmic change in the life of the church.

But then, there has also been significant change within my own being. I am no longer

who I was when I studied in seminary, nor even who I was when I came to this country for my graduate education. Frankly, partly as a result of those studies, the time came when I was quite bored with biblical interpretation. I had read dozens and dozens of commentaries. Actually, every time I had to preach, I read many of those commentaries, and I usually ended up merely repeating what they said. The Bible seemed to have nothing new to say, and what commentators and preachers had to do was simply rephrase what others had said before them, and make it relevant to modern, twentieth-century society.

Then, when I was teaching seminary in Puerto Rico, the Second Vatican Council came along. I had been formed in the ecumenical movement, first the World Methodist Student Federation and then the World Council of Churches. But now we were called to a new type of ecumenism —new, not only in the positive sense that it included Roman Catholics, but also in the more questionable sense that every church institution had to provide what was really an ecumenical show.

AETH

And so did we at the Seminary. We organized a great ecumenical service at the church across the street from the seminary. Just about anybody who was anybody in the church was there. The Roman Catholic archbishop, in full regalia. The Methodist bishop, in even fuller regalia. The Episcopal bishop, in his purple shirt and gleaming pectoral cross, the president of the Lutheran synod with his symbols of office, a dozen Pentecostal pastors in dark suits. And I, too, was there. As dean of the Seminary, I wore my academic regalia. We processed in with a vast choir and accompanied by an organ and trumpets.

All was well, until I came to read Scripture. I began solemnly, and not expecting much of

anything new:

> For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit, we are all baptized into one body —Jews or Greeks, slaves or free— and we were all made to drink of the one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many...

And so I read on, trying to give emphasis to a passage that I had read so many times, and that all those present had also heard many times.

All went well, until I came to a verse I had never noticed before: "those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor." I looked at myself and my attire. I looked at the high dignitaries behind me. I hoped no one noticed, but I could hardly refrain from laughing. What part of the body were we?!

I spent the rest of the service mulling on what I had just read, and the next morning I went to the library to read more about it. There was very little I could find. Apparently, none of the commentators I was reading saw the enormity of what Paul was saying. Many pointed out that what Paul says about the body having many members is relatively commonplace in Hellenistic literature. Apparently, just about all that Paul was saying was not new. The one new thing was precisely the one I had never noticed, the one most commentaries ignored: "those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor."

Then the connection between that passage and the rest of the Epistle suddenly dawned on me. Paul is chastising the Corinthians because in their communion celebrations (which at that time were still a full meal) the rich have too much and the poor do not get enough, and he is telling them that in this body, which is the Church, in this body of Christ, those whom society

AETH

treats with less honor are to be treated with greater honor.

From this I moved to the next obvious question: Why was it that I had never noticed that before? Why was it that my preacher many years ago had not noticed it either? Could it be because the church had forgotten that it was supposed to be a body in which the most undignified members receive the greatest honor? Could it be because the church and its leaders, perhaps even unwittingly, preferred to forget it?

That episode —and some others at about the same time— gave me permission to read Scripture anew, to look at what was there that I had unwittingly been taught to ignore. And Scripture was no longer boring! And commentaries became exactly that: commentaries that may prove helpful to understand a text, but that may also hinder our understanding.

It was that experience that led me several years later, when I published a book on Christian theology from a Hispanic perspective, to include a chapter on "Reading the Bible in Spanish." There were chapters on the doctrine of the Trinity, on Creation, on Christology, and so on. But the chapter that drew most attention was the one on the interpretation of Scripture. This did not surprise me, for Scripture is the very lifeblood of the Latino church, and therefore it was quite natural for Hispanic readers to find this chapter particularly important. Besides, since the Spanish language is one of the strongest bonds linking Latinas and Latinos from various backgrounds, giving us a sense of identity and commonality, it made sense for my readers to be particularly interested in that chapter on reading in Spanish — by which I meant, not so much reading in a particular language, but rather reading from our own perspective and with our own issues in mind.

As I was working on that chapter of the book, it became clear to me that my different perspective on the Bible, my different interpretations of well-knows texts, were not only, nor even primarily, a matter of coming at them from a different culture, but rather of coming at them from a different perspective, from a perspective of marginality. It was not really a matter of reading "in Spanish," but rather of reading from the edges of society, or power, and of prestige.

So, the value and importance of "reading from the edges" is seen in the Biblical interpretation, not only of people who are marginal because of their cultural alienness of their immigration status, but also of others who are marginal for other reasons —the poor, African Americans, women, and many others. For instance, in most classical theology Moses is praised as the great lawgiver. Indeed, in many cases the very name of "Moses" became synonymous with the Law. Today, an ever increasing number of scholars are telling us that in the Biblical perspective the great act of God through Moses was not the giving of the Law—important as that was—but rather leading the people out of bondage in Egypt. But African Americans did not have to wait until scholars came to this conclusion to know that it is so. Thus, while the church of the masters was exalting the work of Moses as the lawgiver, the African American church knew that the great work of Moses began when he was told to go down and "tell Pharaoh, 'Let my people go'."

AETH

But back to my own experience, I learned long ago that the best way to explain something is by giving examples. So, allow me to mention two passages that illustrate for me the way in which my reading of Scripture has changed.

The first I already mentioned yesterday in church. It is the denial of Peter. For those of you who were not here yesterday, I remember hearing a sermon on that subject when I was about seven years old. The preacher asked, "How did people know that Peter was a Christian?" "Ah," he answered, "because when you have been with Christ it shows in your face! Because when you have been with Christ your face shines with joy!" I also remember coming out of church, sitting on the curb across the street, looking at people coming out of church, and deciding that no one had been with Jesus!

Many years later, when I was teaching in Puerto Rico, I was invited to preach during Holy Week at a very large English-speaking church in Florida. It was at that time that I first noted the words of the woman to Peter in the Gospel of Matthew: "You are one of them. Your accent betrays you." In other words, I know you are one of "them" because you speak like "they" do. "They" are Galileans, and so are you. So, you must be one of "them."

Then I asked, why had I never noticed this before? And the answer was obvious: I had not noticed it because I had not been reading the passage from the perspective of an outsider concerned about how my use of language would be received. Now that I was placed, so to speak, at the "edge" of society, I could see what otherwise I could not see.

This theme of the marginality of Galileans as a hermeneutical tool for understanding the Gospel has been put forth and developed by Fr. Virgilio Elizondo, former Rector of the Cathedral of San Antonio, and now at Notre Dame. In his book *Galilean Journey*, Elizondo takes up the theme of *mestizaje* as a way to understand the gospel as well as his own story. *Mestizaje* may well be translated as miscegenation, or as mongrelism. In its traditional sense in colonial society,

AETH

the word was used pejoratively. The *mestizo* is a person who is half Indian and half Spanish, and yet neither Indian nor Spanish. From the point of view of the Spanish, the *mestizo* is little better than an Indian. From the point of view of the Indian, the *mestizo* is almost as bad as the Spanish. Growing up in Texas, Elizondo was repeatedly told that he was a Mexican; and yet, when he was finally able to go to Mexico, he was clearly told that he was a Texan. Who was he, then? Both a Mexican and a Texan, and yet neither Mexican nor Texan. A *mestizo*.

The same is true, Elizondo then says, of Jesus in particular, and of Galileans in general. From the point of view of the Romans, they were almost as bad as Jews. But from the point of view of the "right" Jews of Judea, they were little better than Gentiles.

Therefore, in Elizondo's experience and in his theology, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the affirmation of the *mestizo*, of those who belong, but do not quite belong, of those who have no place where they really belong. Christianity is by nature a *mestizo* religion, in that all purity, be it ethnic, cultural, or even ceremonial, is left behind by the action of God affirming those people and those experiences that by their very nature do not belong —or, one could say, belong in more than one place, and therefore both places reject them.

It is interesting to note that I learned later that, at about the same time that, quite independently from each other, Elizondo and I were mulling over Galilean in-betweenness, Puerto Rican missiologist Orlando Costas was working on the same subject, and exploring how Galilean marginality could serve as a paradigm for Christian mission.

This is one of the central tenets of most Hispanic Theology in the US. Expanding on the themes of Galilee and of *mestizaje*, others have taken up the theme of *Nepantla*, a Náhuatl

AETH

word meaning “the land in between.” And many Latinos and Latinas of Caribbean extraction, where the mixture of races has been mostly between Europeans and Africans, prefer to speak of *mulatez*, the quality of being *mulato*, both black and white, and therefore neither black nor white.

And, let me add, the marginalization of both the *mestizo* and the *mulato* is then used to create divisions within the marginalized community, making *mestizos* believe that they are somehow better than pure Indians, and *mulatos* that they are better than pure Africans.

At any rate, the marginality of Galileans, and how that plays out in the Gospel narrative, should have been obvious to any who read the story of Peter’s denial. But it was not so obvious either to that preacher whom I heard when I was a child, nor to me until I was placed in a situation in which it was practically unavoidable.

Similar issues arose in my mind at about the same time, when visiting a Hispanic Pentecostal church in an impoverished area of New York City. When the pastor announced that he had been preaching a series of sermons on the Ten Commandments, and that this particular Sunday he would preach on the Sabbath, I was quite ready to let my mind wander along more interesting paths. After all, I already knew what he was going to say: The Sabbath is a day holy unto the Lord. Therefore, there are certain things you must not do on the Sabbath, and certain others that you must do.

But then he surprised me. He asked: “How many of you were able to work all of last week?” A few hands went up. Then he asked, “How many of you were looking for work last week?” Most of the adults in the congregation raised their hands.” Finally, he asked: “How is it

AETH

that we live in a society where we are not able to obey the commandment of work?"

He took me aback. Among fundamentalists, I had often heard that on the Sabbath you should not work, you should not conduct business, you should devote all your time to church, and so on. I had heard others discuss whether the Sabbath should be observed on the first or the seventh day of the week. Among liberals, I had often heard this passage used to defend the right to rest, to make certain that laborers are not exploited, and so on. I had grown up in an environment where such rights were staunchly defended. But this man was speaking, not of the right to rest, but of the right to work. His preaching immediately reminded me that there are large numbers of people whose problem is not working too much, but not being able to work enough.

He then continued: "God made us after the divine image. God created, and God rested. God wants us to work, and God wants us to rest. Both are part of the commandment of God."

As he went on, and I reflected on what he was saying, it was clear to me that his use of Scripture took into account the connection between this commandment and other elements in the text that we often do not connect with it. God placed the human creature on the earth to till it, to work on it, to bring it to what God willed it to be. And yet, through sin we have so corrupted things that people created after the image of God cannot be imitators of the God who worked for six days and rested on the seventh.

He then said, "But even if society does not want our work, we must still work, because we are servants of the God who so commands. How are we to do this? We can do it, as creatures placed here to till the garden, by working for a society in which all can work." He then

AETH

went on to speak of a cooperative that the church was organizing in order to develop economic activity in the community and inviting his listeners to work on that project. In that invitation, he spoke not only of the need to organize —a typically modern notion— but also of the fundamental Christian hope that God would intervene. God was calling them to use the tools at their disposal, yes; but this was an invitation to join God in the work of breaking away from the cycle of unemployment and poverty, and a promise that as they joined God, God would join them.

As I continued reflecting on all this, it seemed clear that this pastor was taking the commandment quite literally. In fact, he was taking it more literally than either the conservatives or the liberals. He was taking it literally, but not limiting his reading of it to whatever may have been the context back when the commandment was given, nor even to what he had been told the passage said. He was taking it literally, because he was convinced that it was inspired by the Holy Spirit. But he was also taking it in new directions because he was equally convinced that the same Spirit was still leading him and his congregation. It was the Spirit who inspired both the writing and the reading, and therefore the commandment, rather than the dead letter, was an invitation to new forms of obedience. And it was the Spirit that turned the commandment into a promise: "Six days of the week you will have labor, and on the seventh you will rest."

This way of turning the commandment into a promise is closely linked to our condition as aliens and exiles. Many of us were not born on this land and are constantly reminded of it. Others born here, and even those whose ancestors have lived here for generations, have been

AETH

told repeatedly that they do not belong. Even those whose ancestors were brought to this land by force, so they could build its present wealth, are still told that they do not quite belong. For this reason we find particular meaning in the notion of the people of God as pilgrims and exiles as it appears in Scripture —in the Hebrew Scriptures, as pilgrims from Ur, as exiles in Egypt and in Babylon, and even sometimes as aliens in their own land; and in the New Testament, in the promise of a better city and a new citizenship, of a Reign of God even beyond the reign of Caesar.

Life in exile is often a life of pain and despair. But among the people of God living in exile, hope overcomes pain and despair. "Six days you shall *labor*" is an imperative that reminds us that we are not free to do as we should, even when we wish to do so, that work is a privilege which many among us lack. And at the same time, "Six days you *shall* labor" is a future indicative which promises us that the day will come when, by the intervention of the Spirit of God, the commandment will become a reality.

AETH

Then I come to another passage that is crucial if we are to understand the dialectic of reading Scripture from the edges. This is the story of Pentecost in Acts 2. When we read that story, we are so overwhelmed by the noise like a wind, and by the tongues of fire, and by everyone understanding what the disciples say, that we miss the significance of people being able to hear the preaching of the gospel, as they say, "each in our own tongue." We also tend to overlook the significance of the words, "Are not those who speak all Galileans?"

First, on the matter of hearing "each in our own tongue": If the purpose of the Holy Spirit was to make it possible for all to understand what was being said, the Spirit had two

options. One was to make all understand the language of the disciples —in other words, to make them all understand the Aramean with a Galilean accent that the disciples spoke. The other was to make them understand each in their own tongue.

As far as objective communication is concerned, there would be no difference between these two, for in either case those who heard would learn of the wondrous acts of God of which the disciples spoke.

But there is a big difference. If the Spirit had made all to understand the language of those who spoke, this would mean that this language was normative for the preaching of the gospel; that henceforth in order really to hear the gospel, one would have to hear it in that language. And, since language is indissolubly connected with culture, it would have meant that the culture of the Galileans would be normative in the church. The Galileans, or those who best assimilated their language, culture, and traditions, would forever be in control.

If, on the other hand, the Spirit were to make all those present hear in their own language, this would mean first of all that those hearing, no matter what their language or their culture, would have equal access to the gospel, and equal authority in the community of faith. It would also mean that the control of the message had now escaped from the original preachers. From now on, things would be going on in the community of faith that they, the original proclaimers and teachers of the faith, would not be able to understand, and much less to control.

This is something Latinos and Latinas frequently see in the context of our own denominations. The fact that we speak a different language means that we cannot be as closely

AETH

supervised as some would like, and that we therefore are able to venture along innovative and even unprecedented paths. Obviously, this risks the possibility of serious errors, shortcomings, and missteps. But without such risks, mission would stagnate.

At this point, it may be well to remember what Yale missiologist Lamin Sanneh says in comparing Christianity and Islam, both of which he knows quite well. According to Sanneh, the core difference between the two lies in the translatability of the gospel, in contrast with the non-translatability of the Koran. A translation of the Bible is still the Bible, but a translation of the Koran is not the Koran, but only a translation thereof. And then Sanneh goes on to affirm that this is the reason why in its expansion Christianity has adapted to so many different cultures and taken so many different shapes.

Along the same lines of thought, I would venture to suggest that one of the greatest mistakes of the Roman Catholic Church at the time of the Reformation was to insist on the use of Latin, a language that was dying, and only the educated elite could use and understand. By doing so, it implied that the gospel is untranslatable, that Christians all over Europe, and in Africa, Asia, and Latin America would remain second-class Catholics as long as they did not know the language the Roman Empire had imposed sixteen centuries earlier.

It took the Roman Catholic Church until the twentieth century, at the Second Vatican Council, to correct that mistake. It is no coincidence that this was the first council where the majority represented Third World and poorer churches. And it is no coincidence that it was only after affirming the translatability of the Gospel that the Catholic Church was able to elect its first non-Italian pope since the time of Hadrian VI, precisely at the time of the Reformation, and that

AETH

it has recently elected its first non-European pope.

Be that as it may, there is no doubt that the gospel is translatable, which means that it can move from culture to culture, and that in so doing there are also power shifts within Christianity itself. And this is the work of the Spirit. In brief, I do not know if there was an "Aramaic-only" movement in first-century Judea. But if there was, Pentecost is God's radical "No" to that movement —and to any other such movement that might arise today.

But back to the book of Acts. Here again the marginality of the Galileans is seen. The people listening are certainly surprised that they can hear in their own tongues. But they are also surprised that these people speaking are Galileans. They say: "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" In other words, these who are speaking are supposed to be quiet and meek. They are visitors to Jerusalem. They do not really belong here. Those Galileans probably looked as foreign to good, respectable Judeans as immigrants look today to good, respectable insiders whose own immigrant background is conveniently forgotten.

AETH

If the story of the Gospel, leading from Galilee to Jerusalem, is one in which the marginal Galileans are brought to the very center of God's action in Jerusalem, the story of Acts is one in which even those Galileans find that they cannot retain the center, and that others who would otherwise be marginal are now brought to the center.

This should be obvious even from a very cursory reading of Acts. We may call the book the Acts of the Apostles. But in truth it is the acts of the Spirit bringing others to take the central place of the apostles. There is no doubt that at the very beginning, for the first five chapters, the apostles are at the center of the action. But then, in chapter 6, we find that the twelve are

criticized because they do not seem to attend properly to the needs of the Hellenistic widows. At this point, all Christians were still Jews; but the Aramaic-speaking Jews thought they were better Jews that the marginalized Hellenistic Jews. (One wonders: could the Hellenistic widows who were not receiving their fair share be widows who at Pentecost heard the message, and are now claiming their place jointly with the Aramaic-speaking widows?) At any rate, as a result of criticism raised against the twelve seven others come to the foreground. And please note that all seven have Hellenistic names: Stephen, Philip. Prochorus, Nicanor, Timos, Parmenas, and Nicholas —actually, Nicholas was not even a Jew by birth, but a proselyte from Antioch. One of these seven, Stephen, occupies center-stage in chapters 6 and 7, and another, Philip, in chapter 8. But already in chapter 7 another person appears who is in all likelihood a member of the synagogue of Cilicia, one of the synagogues that framed Stephen: Saul of Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia. Saul then appears again in chapter 9, and by chapter 13 he is rapidly becoming the main character in the story. Meanwhile, as the church moves to ever new environments, the twelve seem to become more and more marginal, and the same is true of the church in Jerusalem, of which he hears for the last time in chapter 21, giving Paul a bad piece of advice.

Thus, the Spirit through whom the Man from Galilee was conceived, and through whom the Galileans had the power to proclaim the gospel at Pentecost, is now empowering others to take the place of the Galileans.

Needless to say, this is crucial for those of us who see in the *mestizaje* of the Galileans a paradigm to understand our own condition and role in the church. If we are given any power by the Spirit, this is not power to retain power, but power to share power, power to invite others

AETH

into the center, even though it may be at the cost of losing our positions of privilege. If our power comes from the Spirit, it is not power to possess, but power to share.

This is the great contribution of a reading of Scripture from the edges of society. To remind us all that the people of God are always in-between, always in Nepantla, always a pilgrim people living in the now with an eye on the not yet; always sharing in the pain of humanity, and yet always hoping for the day when God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; working and even exploited in alien vineyards, and yet knowing that they will sit each under their own vines; living in the violence of urban ghettos, and yet always remembering that they shall turn their swords into plowshares; hiding from those who would deport them, and yet looking for the day when borders will disappear, and no one shall make them afraid.

Until that day, those who live in homeless pilgrimage remind the rest of us that the people of God are always a pilgrim people. Those who live in exile remind all of us that the people of God are always in exile, always longing for a better homeland. Those who live in poverty remind us that we follow a Lord who had nowhere to lay his head. They may be pushed aside because of their broken English or their poor grammar. They may be pushed aside because the color of their skin reminds the nation of its own injustice and the guilt connected with it. But through them the Word of God comes to all of us so that, as in that story of old, we might hear, “each in our own tongue.”

AETH