

AETH: “Mañana from a New Today”

Panel Remarks

February 4, 2026

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Good evening, everyone. I am astonished and humbled to be with you, sharing just a few thoughts in the esteemed company of Dr. Justo González and these colleagues.

Dirt Under One’s Fingernails

You encourage us, Dr. González, that “theology is best done with dirt under one’s fingernails” (p 129). I cannot claim that particular position in my own theologizing.

My ancestors came from the Scandinavian countries, and Germany, and Wales, to name a few of their European homes. And, I’m told, they came from the Trail of Tears, though they were too afraid to preserve that part of our story in confident detail. I have Indigenous ancestors, but I have lived the life (as my Canadian friends would say) of a settler.

I come from north central Missouri, the child of an agronomist who left his family farm to improve the corn industry across the American Midwest – but we pray not *at* the cost of local small farms. My father’s farm family lived in poverty, but I’ve lived in privilege.

And my earliest memory is in a corn field, sitting on an irrigation pipe, squishing the mud between my two-year-old toes. Now that my dad has been gone for 15 years, some of my fondest memories are in the corn field, working for the seed companies he led, summer after VERY HOT summer from the ages of 14 to 23. I have worked long hours in the corn fields and couldn’t scrub my nails clean, but I can’t claim I’ve been oppressed. I’ve been the oppressor.

I’ve benefited from the white, Eurocentric, even male-dominated culture in which I’ve lived. Our family doesn’t want for anything. We “own” property. I am a graduate of top-tier schools and work in the hallowed halls of higher education. I have quickly forgotten my family’s histories or conveniently ignored those of others. That story is part of the position I bring.

Yet after a journey of growth and service in diverse contexts over the past 30 years, I hope I now also bring awareness, and empathy, and hope. I can see that dirt under the fingernails. I know where it’s come from and why it’s there. And it’s with that perspective that I approach my fields of practical theology and organizational leadership.

I wish I had read *Mañana* years ago, Dr. González. When it was first published in 1990, I would have been preparing to enter high school in Carrollton, MO. A star pupil of the Sunday School at our small, Southern Baptist church. And just starting to wonder what I wanted to be when I grew up. By 1996, I was in college, pursuing a major in religious studies to learn “why I believe what I believe.” Maybe I wouldn’t have been ready for *Mañana* at that time. Almost everyone in our rural town looked like us, and we simply didn’t “see” those who didn’t. Our family’s views were fundamentalist and escapist, not ecumenical or material. Some had more means than others, but we were focused on building our own. ...

And let me hasten to add: my family, and my church, taught me to love Jesus. They taught me to love others. They taught me faithful life lessons. For that, I’m forever grateful. And yet, I had much more to learn about the Jesus Way (as my First Nations friends call it) and still do. What an accessible, beautiful gift *Mañana* has been and can be for fellow pilgrims like me – not Hispanic yet committed to God’s best for all of God’s creation, in all our diversity.

Since I’m trained not as a historical theologian but a practical theologian, I’d like to honor this time by imagining together how to put your wisdom, Dr. González, into practice. What can it look like to do theology informed by the “dirt under one’s fingernails” – whether we are the oppressed or the oppressor? What can it look like in our churches, in our theological schools, in our communities? What are some practical frameworks that can help us embody God’s word where we find ourselves today? Together, I’d like to lean more into what Dr. González calls “a new understanding of orthodoxy as closely linked to orthopraxis” (p 50) – of doctrine linked to practice. Or of “reading the Bible in the vocative” – that “the text that we address,” Dr. González reminds us, “addresses us in return” (p 86).

What is *Hesed*?

When I worked at Duke Divinity School in the late 2000s, I helped lead our Duke Youth Academy for Christian Formation. DYA was a program for high school youth to spend two weeks at the seminary, diving more deeply into the Christian story and discerning God’s calls on their lives. That summer, one of our speakers was the Rev. Dr. Jo Bailey Wells (now “the Rt. Rev.” as she serves as a bishop in the Anglican church in England). And she drew our attention to Psalm 136.

You may remember it. This is the Psalm that tells the story of Israel’s history, punctuated with the consistent refrain, “for his steadfast love endures forever.” That phrase – *steadfast love* – represents the Hebrew term *hesed*. It also, Dr. González points out, names our God as a living God who acts in history (pp 92-95) and hints at the Trinitarian God who constitutes the self-giving love that we too should live (pp 111-115).

God is steadfast love. And we should be too. That day at DYA, Dr. Bailey Wells invited us to find our story in Israel's story. To name where we have seen God at work in our lives. And to stay focused on that truth that God is with us, helping us write our stories. I don't recall for certain, but I suspect she also emphasized not just our individual stories but those of our communities. God's steadfast love is the refrain not only for ancient Israel but also for Christianity right now – not of fundamentalist or liberal Christianity, but of that ecumenical Christianity Dr. González envisioned 35 years ago. Of the *Mañana* we still see only partly but always, even now, are invited to join.

There's a fancy theological term that expands on the idea of God's *hesed*, God's steadfast love, in the shape of the Trinity. That word is *perichoresis*, a word I first learned from one of my Oxford tutors for my master's program. Often it is translated or understood as the "divine dance" among the three persons of the Trinity. As I read *Mañana*, I was reminded again: It is hard to wrap our heads around a Trinitarian God, much less connecting with that God ... but maybe it's easier to imagine us joining in a dance of self-giving. We can suggest creative ways of joining God's dance as we live and work in the world.

And yet, as someone who identifies as Type A, or probably a "1" on the Enneagram ... I am a planner. I need some practical frameworks to help inspire and organize my imagination for joining in this dance. And as an organizational leader, I've noticed others find practical frameworks helpful too. For sketching vision and mission for a whole group.

Practical Models for *Hesed*

So here's my idea: I'll share three different types of frameworks, and I hope that through the rest of this panel and the event (as time allows), we'll engage in conversation about them. We won't explore them deeply now, but I'll offer a quick overview and hope you'll make a note of one or two that you'd like to investigate further and maybe try out in your context.

Which of these are you already using, perhaps? Or which resonate most with your work and could help you embody God's steadfast love where you serve? I do believe frameworks like these can help us translate *hesed* into action in our communities, churches, and schools.

But before I share more, let me mention: I also am from Atlanta. For nearly a decade, I worked in this beautiful city as part of FTE, the Forum for Theological Exploration, a leadership incubator that elevates the voices of traditionally underrepresented young leaders for the church. In that context and others, I've been grateful to learn from BIPOC-led and Indigenous-led organizations how to hear stories. How to tell stories. And how to utilize simple frameworks to help all of us imagine next most faithful steps.

Public Narrative

First, for any community organizers in the room: You may be familiar with Marshall Ganz's "public narrative" framework. Ganz is an American scholar of Jewish background focused on grassroots organizing. This kind of framework can help us recognize God's *hesed* through the stories of our lives and the lives of our communities, connecting with each other to advocate for God's *mañana* today. ... We utilized this tool at FTE with members of the Youth Theology Network to inspire their next steps as programs for high school youth.

Pastoral Cycle

Second, for the pastors in the room: You already may use the pastoral cycle in your work, whether you call it that or not. This version – this "praxis" version – comes from a book by Stephen B. Bevans, an American Catholic priest and theologian. This kind of framework helps us recognize God's *hesed* by continually reflecting on life in conversation with Scripture, our Christian traditions, and each other. ... At Acadia Divinity College, we are imagining ways to emphasize the pastoral cycle as we revise our MDiv program and Mentored Ministry opportunities ...

Improvement Cycles

Finally, for the faculty in the room: You already may use versions of the improvement cycle in your work, whether you call it that or not. Two of my favorite versions of this cycle are the Maguerz Arch, originally designed in 1959 by Spanish educator Charles Maguerz; and the MARED framework, created by AETH's own Rev. Dr. Fernando Cascante to help predominantly white theological schools decolonize their work. These cycles help us recognize God's *hesed* through community analysis, empowerment, and dismantling of injustices (even if gradually). Theological schools across the ecology of ATS are utilizing frameworks like these to welcome more diverse learners into classrooms and to prepare them to serve in more diverse ministry contexts.

Well, I may have travelled too far afield into some of my own favorite topics. If so, please allow me to apologize. As I was reading *Mañana*, Dr. González's encouragement – even mandate – to embody robust, earthy, ecumenical Christianity jumped off the page to me. I wonder where American society would be today, especially socio-politically, had more of us heeded that mandate 35 years ago. But perhaps we can wonder instead: where might we be if all of us in this room honor that mandate today? *Y mañana?*

I offer these few thoughts from my position, a non-Hispanic who champions the voices of Hispanics and others traditionally underrepresented in theological education. I offer a few frameworks that might spark our constructive steps forward. I humbly submit these ideas for your consideration, and I look forward to our conversations throughout the event. I conclude with my gratitude, to my colleague and friend the Rev. Dr. Jessica Lugo for the invitation, and to Dr. Justo González for the inspiration.

Gracias.

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