

Reading the Bible from the Margins

Miguel A. De La Torre

ORBIS  BOOKS
Maryknoll, New York 10545

CHAPTER 2

Reading the Bible from the Center

According to the Bible, any child who disrespects his or her parents should be put to death. Leviticus reads, "Anyone who curses their father and mother shall surely be executed" (20:9). Now, as a parent of two preteen-agers, I confess that at times I am very tempted to take this command literally. Yet I wonder, if we were to read in the newspapers that a father killed his son or daughter for uttering a curse toward him and claimed the authority of Scripture as his defense, would good churchgoing Christians rally to his support? If not, why? Why can't a parent put a rebellious teenager to death in accordance with the Bible?

The next verse (Lev. 20:10) calls for the death sentence for anyone who commits adultery. Just think of the impact this would have on our national government! How many high-ranking government officials, TV evangelists, business leaders, and everyday common folk have fallen into this sin? The bloodbath that would have to occur to uphold this commandment is staggering. Additionally, Leviticus 24:16 makes the cursing of God's name a capital offense. Although I personally shudder every time I hear people using the name of the Lord in vain, is their death a fit punishment for their transgression? Would anyone be willing to argue for the death sentence for those who constantly damn the name of God? Likewise, according to Exodus 31:14-15, anyone who works on the Sabbath must be killed. Should we execute police officers, hospital personnel, or firefighters who work on Sundays? What about the waiter who serves you lunch after church? Should his or her tip be a death sentence for working on the Sabbath? As much as we do not want to admit it, we all read biblical texts selectively. Few, if any, would insist that these "peccadillos" deserve

death. Most of us simply choose to ignore or outright disobey the punishments associated with such passages. In effect, all who claim the authority of the Bible make a conscious or unconscious decision to follow some sections of the Scriptures literally while following others symbolically. In fact, if we were to follow literally everything within the biblical text, we would probably end up in jail. For example, Psalm 137:9 provides a paradigm for treating enemies: "Blessed is the one who seizes and dashes your little ones against the stone." How can we reconcile the loving mercy of Christ with the vengeance of smashing the infants of our enemies against stones? We are forced to a choice. Either we take the Bible literally and commit crimes against humanity by obeying the psalmist, or we begin to question how we read and interpret certain sections of the Bible.

How do such verses reflect the social location of those who first penned them? How do we interpret these verses for our time? Does it make a difference in the interpretations if you are the victors or the parents whose babies will be dashed against rocks? Can the biblical text be read objectively so as to discover how these troubling verses are to be applied in the twenty-first century?

As the previous chapter mentioned, everyone approaches the Bible from her or his particular social location. The idea of reading the text from a position of complete "objectivity" is a myth constructed to protect the privileged space of those with the power to legitimize their interpretations. Yet, when those who are marginalized read the biblical text with their own eyes, they find their pain within the biblical story. In using the Bible as a source of reconciliation, salvation, and liberation, those within the margins of society realize that the Bible has also been historically used as a source of alienation, damnation, and subjugation. It is not the Bible that saves but the justice-based actions (praxis) rooted in the reading of the Bible, a reading that liberates when done from a marginalized perspective. Such a reading moves one to think beyond the Bible as simply a text of rules dictated by a God that must be unquestionably obeyed. Social location plays a crucial role in the reading (and the original writing) of the text. When this reading is done by those struggling with oppressive structures, liberation from these same structures becomes the means by which all Christians can move beyond the perception of the Bible as simply a "rule book."

If reading a text implies its application, then those who are disenfranchised, those who live in the underside of Euroamerican history, are the ones who can hear God's words in the context of their own suffering, making their oppressed existence part of the text's interpretation. Such a reading provides a fuller revelation of the Scriptures, a revelation that remains obscure to the dominant culture. Because they have learned how to function in a vulnerable realm constructed by those with power and privilege, they know more about the overall Euroamerican existence, which includes the sphere occupied by the dominant culture, than those with power know about their lives as subjugated "others." This does not confer truth exclusively on the oppressed. It only states that they are in a better position to understand the biblical call for justice than those who deceive themselves into thinking justice already exists.

If reading the Bible from the margins provides a closer understanding of the gospel message, then how is the Bible read from the center, from within the dominant power structures? How is the Bible constructed to justify oppressive structures that protect the power and privilege of the center at the expense of the margins? At the very least, how is the Bible understood so as to encourage the dominant culture to remain complicit with racism, classism, and sexism? Before we can begin to understand how the margins find their liberation and salvation within the biblical text, we must first explore how the text is used to justify the oppression and damnation of those who are disenfranchised.

A PRIVILEGED READING

When we read the Bible, we read it from our social location, a reading that usually justifies our lifestyle even if, at times, our lifestyle contradicts the very essence of the gospel message. Historically, the Bible has been used to justify such acts as genocide, slavery, war, crusades, colonialism, economic plunder, and gender oppression. Bible verses were quoted, sermons preached from pulpits, and theses written in theological academic centers to justify barbaric acts that were labeled "Christian missionary zeal" or "righteous indignation." Millions have unjustly died and perished in the name of Jesus and by the hands of those who call themselves his followers. In fact, one of the slave ships responsible for bringing

Africans to the Americas was named the *Jesus*. Although I do not wish to enter into a discussion concerning the personal "spiritual" fervor of such individuals, I do question how they reconciled the Bible with their oppressive acts. For example, how could "Christian" slave masters during the antebellum period inflict unbearable misery upon other human beings, day in and day out, and still be able to sing God's praises and proclaim God's everlasting mercy on Sunday mornings? How is the love of Christ reconciled with the inhumanity of some of his self-proclaimed followers today who benefit from social structures designed to increase their status at others' expense? In other words, how do they read the Bible from the center of power and privilege?

The Age of Enlightenment is crucial in understanding how the dominant Eurocentric culture reads the Bible. The Enlightenment was an eighteenth-century intellectual movement prevalent throughout western Europe. Centuries of bloody religious conflicts following the Protestant Reformation of the early 1500s, coupled with the rise of science, led thinkers of the Enlightenment to construct a new worldview based on human reason and understanding. Philosophical rationalism gained ascendancy, deriving its methodologies from science and natural philosophy. A major objective of this project was to replace religion, the source of so much human misery, with science. Science became the new means for knowing nature and the destiny of humans. In short, science was looked to as the salvation of humanity. The intolerance of the established Christian churches, which had led to centuries of religious warfare, was associated with a premodern worldview where the answer to every question of the universe was believed to reside in the Bible. The new "modern" worldview replaced the Bible with human reason and science.

While all Christian groups reject the total replacement of religion with science, the tension created by modernity continues to exist. For example, throughout the United States today, state legislatures and local school boards attempt to include creationism (a literal reading of Genesis 1) within the school curricula, to be taught alongside evolutionary theory. This tension, played out in the political sphere, bears witness to the continuous impact of the Enlightenment. An endeavor to reconcile the Bible with science in order to create a harmonious worldview is undertaken by

many scholars within academia. Yet putting God under a microscope makes the Bible into a science book as discussions develop over the meaning of the word "day" in the creation story. Was a day twenty-four hours, or was a day a million years?

What I find interesting is that most biblical scholars from the margins of society usually do not participate in such debates. When people live under oppressive structures, they turn to the Bible for the strength to survive another day, not to figure out how long a day lasted in Genesis 1. The Bible is not read with the intellectual curiosity of solving cosmic mysteries; rather, most people on the margins look to the text to find guidance in dealing with daily life, a life usually marked by struggles and hardships. Debates over the scientific validity of the Scriptures become a luxurious privilege for those who do not endure oppressive and discriminating structures. For the dominant culture, the objective in reading the Bible is to answer such questions. Regardless of the answer, whether it appeals to the fundamentalists or the liberals, the overall dominant culture reads the text through the lens of modernity, even while protesting the present-day ramifications of the Enlightenment.

Does God exist? becomes the overall quest of those residing within the dominant culture. In contrast, from the margins of society the question becomes, What is the character of this God that we claim exists? While the center's evangelistic mission is to convince the nonbeliever to believe, those who reside on the underside of society see their evangelistic venture to be that of convincing the nonperson of his or her humanity based on the image of God that dwells within them. Because those at the center ask different questions than those who reside on the margins of society, the Bible provides different answers. The dominant culture usually looks for answers to questions that are simply unimportant to the social location of those living under oppressive structures. For example, a student once asked me if I supported prayer in schools. The class was at first shocked by my reply, I said I supported books, computers, and microscopes in schools, because the schools within the *barrios* and ghettos of this country lack these basic necessities, which are needed to equip children from the margins to compete in the global marketplace. Prayer in schools becomes a luxury already obtained all that is necessary in providing their children with a competitive education.

A Biblical Paradigm for Justifying Privilege

Besides reading the Bible to answer questions of little use to those who are marginalized, the center also reads the Bible in such a way that its power and privilege remain justified by the biblical text. Such a reading is based on the reader's self-centeredness. Self-centeredness begins with the fall of humanity, the original disobedience of Adam and Eve. In their act of eating the forbidden fruit, the mango, from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they committed sin, a sin rooted in the central idea of usurping God's authority as Creator.¹ The original sin of humanity is the pride of attempting to become "like gods" (Gen. 3:5). Self-centeredness is the endeavor of replacing God with humans, expressed today as the drive for power and privilege. Through unlimited power and privilege, those in the center with sufficient economic privilege have the opportunity of becoming gods, usually at the expense of those who live in the periphery of society.

For example, due to the high consumption of grain-fed livestock by residents of the United States, enough food is consumed by them to feed over a billion people in poor countries. According to Oxford economist Donald Hay, a mere 2 percent of the world's grain harvest is sufficient, if shared, to eliminate world hunger and malnutrition. Yet, ironically, in a world where over thirty-four thousand children die each day of hunger and preventable diseases, the number of overweight adults in the United States increased from 26 to 34 percent between 1988 and 1991. The United States, the world's center, consumes so much of the world's resources that its people now spend billions of dollars annually trying to lose weight in a world where the majority of its inhabitants go to bed hungry. In fact, the dollar value of the food thrown into North American garbage cans each year equals one-fifth of the total annual income of all the Christians living in Africa.² This self-centeredness believes in its moral right to accumulate while others go hungry, never connecting the relationship between having and not having. The accumulation of wealth is understood as the product of "hard work."

The sharing of goods and possessions, each according to his or her needs, is usually attributed to Karl Marx, and most Christians believe this phrase to be a Marxist dictum. In reality, it is a bibli-

cal principle for the Christian church, one established early in its formation. The book of Acts states, "And the believers together, holding all things in common, sold their goods and possessions and distributed them to all, according to each one's need" (2:44-45). Yet this concept, dangerously reminiscent of some type of socialism, is rejected by those of us who live in a capitalist society, because we have been taught that communism/socialism is evil or possibly that it is a good idea that simply does not work. Our capitalist system takes precedence; we rarely think of how those who are economically disenfranchised understand passages like the one found in Acts 2.

In spite of the dominant culture's rhetoric of succeeding through hard work, seldom have the rich or powerful worked as hard as a migrant laborer. Picking blueberries, cucumbers, or onions is harsh, backbreaking work, but it is not enough to advance economically because compensations fall way below the minimum wage. Adults and their children (who should be in school) work in the fields for long hours and barely gain enough funds to maintain a household. Even if they were paid minimum wages, their income would still fall \$5,000 below the 1998 poverty line. Their economic oppression secures low prices for fresh fruits and vegetables, making consumers of these produce complicit with their exploitation.

Migrant workers, barely existing on the margins of society, are also needed as a reserve army of disposable laborers to keep wages depressed so that the benefits are passed on to the company owners or the corporate officers and their stockholders. Whether we wish to admit it or not, a segment of the population must be kept in a state of financial submission in order for the overall economy to function at top efficiency. This segment is usually composed of people on the margins, who are disproportionately overrepresented in unemployment figures. Like the migrant workers, they are defined by the dominant culture as people holding our community back, looking for a handout, and using up *our* social services. The center remains complicit with economic structures that require a segment of the population to remain in poverty so that the dominant culture can benefit from lower grocery bills and so that these savings can be diverted to some of life's necessities, like a bigger house or a luxury car. Our having is possible because the migrant workers, and others like them, have not. And our willingness to

maintain the status quo, which allows the center to benefit from the sweat of the marginalized labor, is testimony to our self-centeredness.

Of course, self-centeredness is not limited to the center's relationship with migrant workers. The dominant culture benefits and advances in society simply because it belongs to the center. A sweeping five-year study released in October 1999 concluded that skin color remains a major factor in determining economic success within the United States. The seven-volume survey, focusing on Boston, Atlanta, Detroit, and Los Angeles, studied job market participation, racial inequality, and political attitudes among 9,000 households and 3,500 employers. The fifty researchers discovered that race continues to be deeply entrenched in determining success within the United States even though many within the dominant culture fail to realize this or are unwilling to admit it. The study revealed the pervasiveness of racist structures, from highly segregated housing to labor markets that hire one racial group over another, with people of color detrimentally affected.³ The bottom line: whiteness is a social privilege that provides opportunities for housing, jobs, and markets unavailable to most people on the margins. Success within the United States may have more to do with white skin pigmentation than "hard work."

Additionally, whiteness protects violators of the law from being punished as severely as nonwhites. According to a ninety-page report released by the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, a Washington, D.C.-based civil-rights coalition, justice and skin pigmentation continue to remain linked. Titled "Justice on Trial: Racial Disparities in the American Criminal Justice System," the report found that 1) 74 percent of all those who are deported by the INS are of Mexican origin even though less than half of all undocumented people are from Mexico; 2) Latino/as are likely to be released in only 26 percent of their legal cases while non-Hispanics are released before trial 66 percent of the time; and 3) blacks who kill whites were sentenced to death twenty-two times more frequently than blacks who kill blacks and seven times more frequently than whites who kill blacks. Additionally, black youths are six times more likely to be imprisoned than white youths, even when charged with similar crimes and when neither has a prior record.⁴

Self-centeredness, as the sin of pride, pursues power and privilege at the expense or detriment of others in its attempt to replace God with the self. Yet no one is willing to admit one's own self-centeredness. Instead, most wish to proclaim their self-righteousness. Here is a dialectical conflict. How do well-meaning Christians read the Bible in order to reconcile a faith in Christ with their continuous pursuit of power and privilege? In other words, how is the Bible read to justify living amid wealth and privilege while others lack basic rights and necessities?

The following example may help answer these questions. In reading the Gospels, we discover that Jesus spoke a great deal about money, our relationship to money, and the different relationships money creates. In fact, he mentions this subject more than he does heaven, the Spirit, God's kingdom, or his own messiahship. Jesus refers to money more than any other topic, clearly showing that he knew where our treasures lay. According to Matthew, Jesus provides his would-be followers with a clear choice: "No one is able to serve two lords. For they will either hate the one and love the other, or they will cleave to one and despise the other. You are not able to serve God and Mammon" (6:24). "Mammon" is an Aramaic word for wealth, money, or property. Here is the choice Jesus gives us: we can pursue self-centeredness and the power and privilege it provides or we can choose to follow God, but we can't do both. Nonetheless, those at the center, accustomed to its privilege, want to do both. And they believe that it is possible to serve God and to protect their power and privilege. This pursuit of power and wealth, masked under a facade of Christianity, inevitably leads to injustice, here defined as the undue privilege obtained by the powerful and the lack of rights existing for the powerless.

Rationalizing injustices allows those at the center to continue benefiting at the expense of the margins while simultaneously defining themselves as good Christians. Their power and privilege are justified as something earned purely through the sweat of their brow. This rationalization can take the form of ideology. For example, in capitalism the ideology of "the survival of the fittest" dismisses those who reside in the underside of capitalism as not being fit to survive. Their poverty becomes proof of their deserved marginality. The success of the center is attributed to its ingenuity and hard work. If the disenfranchised were not so lazy or were smarter, then they too could earn a slice of the American pie.

Ideologies provide simple answers to inequalities by laying the blame of marginality upon the victims of oppressive structures. This type of ideology also contributes to the rise of stereotyping. If the exclusive neighborhoods are predominantly white while the economically deprived areas are mainly composed of people of color, if those who occupy positions in top management and U.S. corporate boardrooms are white males while those who occupy the menial positions are women and people on the margins, and if our prison systems remain disproportionately composed of non-white males, the center can only conclude that people on the margins are lazy and so live in the ghettos and *barrios*, that women and minorities are less intelligent and so occupy servile jobs, and that nonwhite males are dangerous and wicked creatures deserving incarceration.

While disenfranchised groups see unjust social structures, those who benefit from those structures fail or refuse to recognize the status quo as oppressive; here lies a major division between U.S. citizens. Yet, when those who benefit from unjust structures are able to make their perspectives normative due to the power of the center, they create a worldview that demands biblical justification in order to avoid any incongruity between what they believe and what they do. The unchecked power of the dominant culture that resides in the center of society provides the privilege of defining and determining how the Bible is read and interpreted. Hence, what develops is an attempt to read the Bible to redefine or to justify the unjust privileges of the center. Reading the Bible to justify one's social location imprisons the text by spiritualizing reality and thus obscuring or hiding it. This results in a culture of silence prevailing where the interpretation of the center is neither questioned nor challenged.

The danger for those on the margins is that they will read the Bible through the eyes of elite white males and convince themselves of the justice of their own oppression. Unaware of the reasons for their marginalization, those who are disenfranchised often accept the order of things that relegates them to be exploited. Yet, as those on the margins begin to claim the biblical text as their own, their reading shifts to a social location of the margins. Such a reading threatens what has been constructed by the center as the normative interpretation and threatens the very social structures that create oppression.

Reading the Bible to justify one's social location results in a spiritual or metaphoric reading of the biblical text rather than a material reading. A metaphoric reading is the process of interpreting the biblical text in such a way that its call for action becomes an intention or conviction of the heart rather than physical action to be undertaken. A material reading, on the other hand, attempts to introduce the reality of daily struggles into the Bible. Close attention is given to how the social location of the marginalized, both today and during biblical times, affects how the Bible should be understood.

For example, for many within the center, the entire message and purpose of the Bible can be reduced to the biblical verse found in John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that God gave God's only begotten Son, so that everyone believing in him may not perish but have life everlasting." It is not uncommon to see someone holding up a poster sign at a televised sporting event with simply "John 3:16" written upon it. Yet most who are marginalized look to Luke 4:18-19. In these verses, Luke records the first sermon Jesus ever gave, a sermon that is interpreted as the foundation of the gospel message, in effect Jesus' mission statement for action. In these verses, Jesus says, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, therefore the Spirit anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. The Spirit has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach liberation to the captives, and new sight to the blind, to set those who are oppressed free, and to preach an acceptable year of the Lord." In this passage, Jesus singles out those who are poor as the recipients of the Good News. The gospel is for those who are poor and oppressed, and through them the message is extended toward those who profit from the marginalized.

Jesus is quoting the prophet Isaiah (61:1-2), who wrote about the physical captivity and oppression of the Israelites. In Jesus' mission statement, he refers to the physical problems of those who reside on the margins of society. A metaphoric reading would avoid Jesus' clear intention by interpreting his words to mean that all are poor *in spirit*, hence all are in need of the Good News. Even the rich, those with power and privilege who benefit at the expense of the marginalized, can be defined as poor, thus avoiding any possible responsibility or obligation toward those whom Jesus called poor. While the need of those in the center to hear the Good News

is not denied, the radicalness of Jesus' words is to make those in the margins the recipients of the gospel, and the periphery of society the social location from where the gospel is defined and understood. Yet, when this radicalness is moderated by defining the center as "poor in spirit," then the mandate to correct unjust structures that create poverty is watered down.

When those in the center read the Bible to justify privilege, they are not satisfied with simply rationalizing their own social location. A desire also exists to define their power and privilege as a blessing from God, given because of their moral righteousness. When some evangelical Christians see a homeless person, usually their first reaction is to witness God's salvation to them. The homeless person becomes an object for conversion. For this reason, many Christian homeless shelters require the participants to hear a sermon before they are fed. If their souls can be saved, then God will bless them with material possessions. Direct action toward social justice (works) is minimized in favor of right belief (doctrine). Only the latter can save.

While there is no denying that some poverty is caused by wrong choices, specifically drug and alcohol abuse, in many cases substance abuse is a means of escaping the hopelessness of existing on the margins of society. What can be expected when children living in the ghettos and *barrios* are forced to attend deteriorating school buildings without adequate books and supplies while the schools in the white neighborhoods on the other side of town have the latest technology needed to make their students competitive in a global marketplace? This inequality in educational opportunities is one of the factors eventually contributing to unemployment and homelessness. Unjust social structures also affect the ability to acquire adequate employment. For example, it took unskilled, unemployed whites in Detroit, representative of the rest of the nation's major cities, approximately 91 hours to generate a job offer, while it took unskilled, unemployed blacks 167 hours to obtain a similar offer.⁵ Social forces such as these produce opportunities for one segment of society and deny them to another. When this lack of opportunities leads to poverty, specifically in the extreme form of homelessness, the center rationalizes its privilege by blaming the victims for their poverty. An extreme form of justifying the center's "blessings" is a religious ideology known as prosperity theology. Simply

stated, prosperity theology maintains that Christians are "children of the King. Their Creator wants only the best for God's children and is ready to materially bless them *if* they have enough faith.

To read the Bible from the center, from a social location of power and privilege, is to use the Bible to justify a lifestyle constructed through opportunities denied to most people on the margins. For some Christians from the center of power and privilege, the Bible is often read to uncover its mysteries, debate issues such as creationism versus evolution, or advocate personal salvation. Missing is any substantial discourse on sin as manifested in the social structures that create undue privilege for the center and a lack of rights for the powerless. Reading the Bible from the margins moves the discourse toward a concrete community-based plan of action.

Pitfalls in Raising Consciousness

Learning to read the Bible from the margins liberates the center from using the Bible to justify its privilege and power. Yet the raising of consciousness for the center does not automatically insure that these Christians will participate in actions that liberate the disenfranchised. In fact, several pitfalls exist when the center's consciousness is raised yet people do nothing to change oppressive structures.

For example, when those at the center realize that their reading of the Bible does not justify their privileged space, they may experience anguish and dismay, but these feelings are insufficient to establish a more just social order. At times, the center, motivated by guilt, may begin to make those who are marginalized the object of their humanitarianism. Through charities or false generosity, those of the center may attempt to mentor those they consider less fortunate, still refusing to connect their own "having" with the "not having" of the disenfranchised. But the marginalized neither need nor require pity from the center or its models for emulation.

What is required for the salvation of the center and for the creation of a just society is the radical commitment to be in solidarity with those who exist on the margins of society and to accompany them in their daily struggle. This does not mean approaching

the margins to lead them out of their oppression but to be in solidarity and to serve them as they formulate their own actions for liberation. Solidarity is no easy task because those at the center are often unable to free themselves from their former prejudices. These prejudices can include suspicion about the ability of the disenfranchised to think for themselves, to understand how oppressive power structures work, or to figure out how best to overcome these structures.

WORDS OF CONCERN

Traditionally, disenfranchised groups have constructed well-defined categories as to who are the perpetrators and the victims of injustices. All too often, people on the margins tend to identify the oppressive structures of the dominant Eurocentric culture while overlooking those within their own marginalized community. Yet within the space of disenfranchised groups, intrastuctures of oppression also exist.

Additionally, there is a real and present danger of romanticizing the social location of the marginalized. Their hermeneutical privilege can absolutize radical actions inconsistent with the biblical text but nonetheless perceived as a necessary process toward liberation. In effect, the Bible may simply baptize whatever actions originate or are initiated within the margins of society. Such a reading falls into the peril of confusing subjectivity for objectivity, where the Scriptures are interpreted to justify positions and strategies that may promise immediate liberation from oppressive social structures but, in the long run, may simply replace those in power with a new group, never dealing with the oppressive structures themselves.

For example, what happens when historically oppressed groups obtain financial success? In reading the Bible from the margins, readers must guard against becoming themselves suboppressors by surmounting the structures of oppression rather than dismantling them. When historically marginalized groups are taught how to read the Bible and define social structures from the perspectives of the dominant culture, the possibility exists that if they gain some power, they might in turn use the oppressive structures as their model. Equality with white upper-class males becomes confused

with the goal of liberation. Liberation is thus understood as equality with white elite males, even though the space occupied by these elite white males requires the oppression of some other group to maintain their power and privilege.⁶

Another similar concern to be avoided is the temptation to equalize all forms of marginality. In an attempt to create solidarity among marginalized communities, at times intrastuctures of oppression are avoided or ignored. For example, among Hispanics, some privilege exists for those who do not have pronounced Amerindian or African features. Additionally, ethnic discrimination is evident between Cubans and Puerto Ricans, Mexicans and Central Americans, Chileans and Argentinians, and any other combination. The same can be said about ethnic discrimination within Asian communities, as in the case of Japanese, Koreans (North or South), Vietnamese, and Chinese, just to name a few. Among African Americans, those with lighter skin pigmentation usually benefit more from society than those who are darker. If whiteness is defined as ultimate perfection, then those who are closest to being white obtain some privilege denied their darker compatriots. One must also add to this mix patriarchal structures and homophobic tendencies in all of these traditionally marginalized groups. In effect, a web of oppression exists that at times privileges a section of the marginalized.

Like the dominant culture, marginalized communities must apply a hermeneutics of suspicion; that is, they must also be suspicious of how they interpret the Bible and be fully aware of how their own social location influences their interpretations. The salient individualism prevalent within the dominant culture must be avoided lest the Bible become a source that confirms one's own ideology. Reading the Bible within the faith community helps avoid the temptation of an individualistic reading of self-justification that justifies whatever one is doing.

For this reason, it is crucial to hear the testimonies of our elders, who are often ignored by our culture but mightily used by the Spirit of God to reveal God's will. The experience of most faith communities is that the greatest wisdom appears to emanate from these elders of the church, rather than professors, seminary-educated pastors, deacons, or other ministers who are at times chosen for these positions because of their standing in the overall com-

munity. Latina theologian Elizabeth Conde-Frazier illustrates how matriarchs in particular become modern prophets of God's word to those who are abused. She speaks of a woman of faith in her seventies by the name of Doña Inez. One day a woman, who bore the evidence of physical abuse, came to a Bible study in which Doña Inez was participating. Doña Inez caressed the abused woman, attempting to soothe her body and spirit. Finally, in a public whisper, she said,

Because the Bible says that what we loose on earth will be loosed in heaven and what we bind on earth will be bound in Heaven, in the name of Jesus I loose you from your bonds to this man who has done this to you. You are not guilty of anything he has done. Go now to your cousin's house and start a new life. Don't look back or go back like Lot's wife. In God's name, we will provide for you all your needs.

Her words not only set this oppressed woman free but also bound the rest of the faith community to support and provide for her.

SEARCHING FOR THE ABUNDANT LIFE

This chapter has explored how the Bible is read by those who benefit from oppressive social structures to justify their privilege. Some biblical verses have been misinterpreted, consciously or unconsciously, to protect the power and privilege of the dominant culture. Other verses seem to imply the sanctification of non-Christian actions such as ethnic cleansing. How then can Christians complicit in the oppression of their neighbors continue to rely on the authority of Scripture as the basis for Christian ethics? What type of morality can the faith community claim?

It is important to remember that the biblical text is the witness of God's revelation to humanity, a book designed to point the reader to the Deity. But is the Bible the fullest revelation of God to humanity? No, Jesus is the fullest revelation of God to humanity. The Bible bears witness to that revelation and as such becomes the basis of faith for the community of believers. Yet it is important to acknowledge that the Bible is written from within the social location of different writers. While this multitude of writers span-

ning centuries all proclaim the same revelation of God's love and mercy, a love and mercy that find ultimate manifestation in the incarnation, these writers were born into, and were greatly influenced by, their social environments. Their writings assumed the normative oppressive structures of their times, structures we clearly repudiate today. Does this invalidate the Bible? No! But it clearly places a greater responsibility on the reader to interpret the text in light of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

How then do those of the faith community read the Bible, still claiming authority for their lives yet rejecting the passages that appear to call for the death of others? Readers should always submit their interpretation to the Holy Spirit, reading the text within the marginalized body of faith and remaining always cognizant of the basic purpose of the gospel. Jesus Christ, in the Gospel of John, said it best: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (10:10).

Simply put, if a biblical interpretation prevents life from being lived abundantly by a segment of the population or, worse, if it brings death, then it is anti-gospel. When a reading of the Bible ignores how minority groups are denied access to opportunities, when the Bible is read to rationalize the riches of the center while disregarding the plight of the poor, and when reading the Bible vindicates the relegation of women to second-class status, then such interpretations cease to be biblically based. Only interpretations that empower all elements of humanity, offering abundant life in the here-now, as opposed to just the here-after, are biblically sound.

Jesus Christ and his life-giving mission become the lens by which the rest of the biblical text is interpreted. During the Sermon on the Mount, as found in Matthew 5-7, Jesus reinterprets the Hebrew Scriptures to bring them in line with the gospel message, clearly telling his followers to reject passages that bring subjugation or death to others. Specifically, Jesus said in Matthew, "You heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist evil, but whoever strikes you on your right cheek, turn to him the other" (5:38-39). According to Jesus, the biblical mandate of Exodus 21:24, which literally calls for "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," had to be rejected by his followers. In short, Jesus is calling his disciples to renounce a segment of Scripture!

These so-called laws of retaliation, known as the *lex talionis*, were never intended to require vengeance but, rather, to restrict it. Yet Jesus does away with the whole concept of revenge by calling his followers to a higher standard in interpreting the Hebrew Bible. Instead, the disciple of Christ is required to express the unconditional love of God. The formerly accepted biblical interpretation that sanctioned limited retributive vengeance was replaced with a new interpretation that mirrored the life and mission of Christ. In this same spirit, those who have historically suffered under the dominant culture's interpretations of the Bible question, as did Jesus, normative interpretations of the text and, at times, the passages themselves if the end results bring oppression and deny "life abundance."

How do we know if an interpretation or a passage is responsible for creating oppressive structures? By recognizing that at times individuals have no choice but to choose among options that are all unsatisfactory. For example, most Christians agree that they should not lie. Nevertheless, Exodus 1:15-22 recounts the story of two midwives who were commanded by the pharaoh to kill all the male children born to the Israelites. The midwives, however, disobeyed the pharaoh because they "feared God." When questioned as to why they defied the pharaoh, they lied, stating that Hebrew women were more vigorous than Egyptian women and gave birth before the midwives were able to attend them. Even though they lied to the pharaoh, Exodus states, "And God dealt well with the midwives" (1:20).

If the Bible is read as a book of regulations that clearly determine right and wrong, then passages like this one in Exodus become difficult to understand. If lying is always wrong, how then can God bless these two women for lying? Absolute truths derived from the Bible become somewhat problematic. Often, such absolutes become one of the privileges of those who are sheltered from the harshness of oppressive structures. Like the midwives, people who live under oppressive structures often find themselves in situations where decisions aren't easy or obvious and may even contradict supposed biblical principles. Many times the only choice available is the one in which a "lesser" evil is chosen. Yes, the midwives could have told the truth, but they would have been killed for disobeying the pharaoh, and someone else would have been

found to carry out the pharaoh's wishes; or they could have lied and continued to save as many Hebrew boys as possible. Both killing and lying are vices to be avoided, but in this case, lying had the potential to save lives, and in the end Moses grew up to be used by God to liberate God's chosen people.

Being caught between two sinful choices due to the overall structures of oppression can also be illustrated in the story of Doña Inez presented earlier. Doña Inez told the battered wife to leave her abusive husband. According to Malachi 2:16, God hates divorce. This oppressed woman—and her community of faith—was forced to make one of two choices, both of which were bad. Either she divorced her husband or she continued to live in submission to an abusive situation. Those who know what it means to live within a marginalized space, like Doña Inez, who suffered under both ethnic discrimination and sexism, can be effective guides for others who face oppression. At times, the only way to choose is to pick the action that most closely resembles the purpose of Jesus, who “came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

All biblical interpretations, to a greater or lesser degree, are subjective. None of us comes to the Bible objectively. Someone, usually someone we love and respect, like our parents, our pastor, or a teacher, has interpreted the text for us. Our love and affection for these persons are manifested by accepting their interpretations. Yet it is important to question interpretations that justify unjust social structures, specifically in the area of racism, classism, and sexism. Before exploring how the Bible is read from the margins so as to claim the liberative message of the gospel, it will be helpful to see how the center has historically read the Bible to justify race, class, and gender oppression. It is important to note that while these three forms of oppression are examined separately, in reality they are intertwined. Race, class, and gender oppressions are the three prongs of “Satan’s” pitchfork.

CHAPTER 3

Unmasking the Biblical Justification of Racism and Classism

He was a young African man from Zimbabwe named John, a new immigrant to the United States. I met John in a Bible class I was teaching at a predominantly African and African American church in Yeadon, Pennsylvania, where my family and I chose to worship. I was doing a series on how the Bible has been used to justify race, class, and gender oppression. I challenged my fellow congregants to read the Bible from their particular social location, using their cultural symbols to understand the mysteries of God and hear the voice of God's Spirit. After the class, John approached me. He was perplexed at my insistence that he should attempt to understand God through his own culture. He said that when he became a Christian, the missionary told him that he now had to adopt a “Christian” name. At first I did not understand what he meant. But the more we talked, I began to realize that John was not his birth name. Becoming a Christian meant that he had to disassociate with his “pagan” African past, including his birth name. I asked him what his real name was. He replied, “Ruvimbo.” I then told him that Ruvimbo is indeed his Christian name and John is his pagan name. I could see the confusion in his eyes—after all, I was challenging the worldview he was taught by those responsible for his Christianization. Besides, he had already legally changed his name to John.

As the months went by, whenever I saw him, I made it a point to call him Ruvimbo. One day, he was in a crowd of friends, all from different African nations yet all having European names. “Hello, Ruvimbo, how are you doing?” I asked. He replied that

CHAPTER 5

Who Do You Say I Am?

During Holy Week of 2001, the Discovery Channel and the British Broadcasting Corporation coproduced a television documentary titled *Jesus: The Complete Story*. While some interpretations based on so-called recent scientific discoveries were questionable, of interest was the attempt to re-create Jesus' physical appearance. Using a two-thousand-year-old Jewish skull, a forensic artist created a computer-generated image of what Jesus might have looked like. Skin pigmentation and hair color were based on third-century frescoes of Jewish faces found in ruins at Dura-Europos in Syria. The final image revealed an olive-skinned man with short dark curly hair. This image of Jesus challenged the traditional one that dates from the fifth century, as well as the more modern white-skinned, blue-eyed, blond-haired Jesus popularized on stained-glass windows and portraits.

For purposes of our inquiry, it really is unimportant if this reconstructed image represents how Jesus might have looked. Of greater interest is the reaction of some members of the dominant culture to this non-Eurocentric-looking Jesus, a reaction best illustrated by newspaper columnist Kathleen Parker of the Tribune Media Services in an article titled "Jesus Falls Victim to Makeover Madness." She bemoaned the fact that "this new Jesus looks like no one familiar. The willowy, long-haired figure who in picture books attracted children . . . now looks like the kind of guy who wouldn't make it through airport security." She was specifically disgusted with the new Jesus' jaw, which "looks likely to chomp down on a brontosaurus thigh," and his wide nose, which she calls "a snout that snorts." She longs for the Jesus of her "childhood Bible storybook." In short, she voices her anger that the white Jesus she

grew up with is being replaced by an ethnic-looking Jesus, a Jesus who looks more like someone from the margins of society. She concludes by blasting the tendency of academic researchers to "debunk" the Aryan Jesus, insisting "that biblical revisionists won't be satisfied until they discover that Jesus was *really* a bisexual, cross-dressing, whale-saving, tobacco-hating, vegetarian African Queen who actually went to temple to lobby for women's rights."¹

It is understandable that some from the dominant culture, like columnist Kathleen Parker, wish to maintain an image of a Jesus who, like them, is white. Yet, for the vast majority of people on the margins, a Jesus who is white does not necessarily represent salvation. For example, James Cone states that white theology cannot be Christian theology. Rather, it becomes a theology of white oppressors that provides divine sanction for criminal acts committed upon those who are oppressed.² As long as people on the margins bow their knees to a Christ who resembles their oppressors, people on the margins will also find themselves bowing before their oppressors. For Christ to have any power to liberate those who are disenfranchised, Jesus must be seen, perceived, and understood through the eyes of the marginalized. Such an action demands that the white Christ of the dominant culture, the Jesus of Kathleen Parker's childhood storybook Bible, be rejected by people from the margins, even though it may be an accepted image for Euroamericans.

In the early 1500s, Europeans in search of God, glory, and gold participated in the systematic process of eliminating Amerindians from the land they held communally. Upon arriving in what would eventually be called the Caribbean, these Christian men raped Amerindian women, disemboweled Amerindian children, and butchered Amerindian men. A local chieftain named Hatuey chose to resist the onslaught by creating a loose confederation of Amerindians to fight the invading colonizers. For three months he carried out a kind of guerrilla warfare, but he was eventually captured and condemned to death. As Hatuey was about to be burned at the stake, a Franciscan friar attempted to convert him to Christ with the promise of heaven and the threat of hell. Hatuey is reported to have asked if Christians went to heaven. The friar answered in the affirmative, and Hatuey retorted that he did not want to go to heaven, where he would see such cruel people.

Hatuey, along with many Amerindians, rejected the white Jesus of the dominant culture.

In 1619, a year before the *Mayflower* landed on Plymouth Rock and a few days after the first session of the Virginia House of Burgesses, the first slave ship docked in Virginia. It was named the *Jesus*. Prior to being led away from their homeland forever, Africans were forced to pass under a religious cleric who usually sat on an ivory chair baptizing these chained "heathens" in the name of Jesus. Throughout the Middle Passage, these slaves would see pious captains holding prayer services twice a day and penning famous hymns about the sweet name of Jesus or God's amazing grace. These Africans, being led to a life of servitude, like so many of their descendants, saw no reason to turn to the white Jesus of the dominant culture.

Like Amerindians and Africans, the people of the world have been told that there is only one true representation of Jesus and shown illustrations or images drawn by members of the dominant culture, such as columnist Kathleen Parker. This Jesus becomes a collective representation of society, a symbolic expression that provides a sense of unity and functions to solidify society. The Jesus of the dominant culture serves as a means by which those who are privileged transmit their culture, morality, and values from one generation to the next. It provides a divine symbolic mandate for models of social behavior designed to bless those with power who benefit from the status quo. Is it any wonder that the Kathleen Parkers of society find a nonwhite Jesus threatening?

The salvific gospel message of liberation incarnated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ should be the criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted. Unfortunately, through the white Jesus of the dominant culture, the opposite has occurred. The name of Jesus has been used historically to justify oppression and injustice. Here, then, is the basic question that people on the margins must ask when searching for the Christ who will serve as the touchstone for all biblical interpretations: does this image of Jesus Christ provide life and provide it abundantly? Rather than being a Jesus that provides abundant life, the white Jesus has been used to bring abundant death to those on the margins of society, and for this reason the white Jesus is rejected by some people on the margins because it has historically served as the Antichrist of

Christianity. The white Christ promised to the Amerindian about to be suffocated and the white Jesus whose name was blazoned upon the slave ship can symbolize for the people on the margins Satan, hiding in the image of an angel of light.

If the image of a white Christ symbolizes the religious sanction of oppressive societal structures, how should people on the margins perceive Jesus? Inevitably, every semester one of my students will ask me how I would physically describe Jesus. They really want me to comment on the color of his skin. Is it white? Black? Olive tone? I always respond in the same fashion: when I attempt to picture the incarnation, I envision Jesus as an old black Latina woman with AIDS. Why? The most disdained by society is the form the Deity takes. Because of racism, sexism, agism, and society's fear of AIDS, such a person is normatively avoided, ignored, and shunned. Yet in Matthew Jesus says that he is just that person: "Truly I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of these, the least of my people, you did it to me" (25:40). Jesus can be found among those whom society marginalizes. That homeless person you passed by this morning, avoiding eye contact, he is Jesus. The woman from the margins you refused to hire, the man of color cited by the police for driving under the influence of being nonwhite, the family from the margins who is charged higher interest and insurance rates—these are all Jesus. The person with AIDS whom we condemn, equating his or her infirmity with God's punishment, this person is also Jesus. All those people who make us uncomfortable because they do not belong to our race, ethnic group, or economic class embody Jesus. Jesus is reincarnated in the lives of those who are crucified today, a sacrifice so that those in power can continue to enjoy their privilege.

Jesus ties his being with those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, alien, imprisoned, and ill. Whatever Jesus may look like, he can be found in the struggle of the disenfranchised, not because they are holier but because they must struggle for the abundant life. If we want to describe Jesus' appearance, we need to describe the appearance of those who reside in the margins of society. If we want to commune with Christ, if we want to look into the eyes of the one we call Lord, then we can access him when we walk in solidarity, when we accompany the outcasts of society. For whatever is done or not done to one of these is done or not done to Jesus. This may

be why the writer of Hebrews reminds us to show hospitality toward strangers, for "through this some may have unknowingly entertained angels" (13:2).

Because all people depict ultimate reality in a form native to their own culture, a Eurocentric Christ, although appropriate for the dominant culture, can seem powerless for people residing on the underside of that society. Because a Eurocentric Christ is incongruent with the reality that the disenfranchised are forced to occupy, salvation for them will be achieved when the white Christ of the dominant culture is rejected. To read, see, and define Christ from the margins is to make the message of the gospel relevant to those who are disenfranchised and trying to survive just one more day. As during the days of his earthly ministry, Jesus is not to be found among the religious elite who occupy the center of society, comfortable in their ornate cathedrals; rather he is found among the publicans, tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners, in short, those who are considered outcasts by society. It is to the margins of society that we must go in order to find Jesus. The margins of society, in the here and now, in this time and place, are understood as encompassing the poor, Hispanics, Amerindians, Asian Americans, blacks, members of other disenfranchised groups, women, and gays.

THE ECONOMICALLY MARGINALIZED CHRIST

Who is this Jesus who was called Lord and Savior by those who suffered economically at the margins of society? Who is the Christ of the poor? The biblical text tells us that, although divine, he became human, assuming the condition of a slave, according to Paul's letter to the Philippians:

[Jesus Christ], who subsisting in the form of God thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, in the likeness of humans, and being found in the fashion of a human, he humbled himself, becoming obedient until death, even the death of the cross. (2:6-8)

The radicalness of the incarnation is not so much that the Creator of the universe became a frail human but rather that God chose

to become poor, to take the form of a slave. Jesus willingly assumed the role of the ultradisfranchised. He was born into, lived, and died in poverty. Under our Christmas trees, among the multitude of conspicuous gifts, we usually have a nativity scene. The baby Jesus rests comfortably in a crib made of wood while angelic cows gaze upon the miracle. The proud parents (Mary and Joseph) survey the sanitary scene as kings and peasants come to worship. Yet, if we accept the reliability of the Gospels (particularly Matthew and Luke), then Jesus was born in a barn, full of the manure of those "angelic cows" and the flies attracted to most stables. A manger was either a wooden box or a hole on the cave wall from where horses and cattle ate. Like a barn animal, Mary was forced to give birth amidst such unsanitary conditions. Jesus physically entered this world as if he were homeless. This fact is not lost on the poor of the earth, who recognize God's solidarity with them, as articulated in the songs slaves sung:

Poor little Jesus boy
Made him to be born in a manger
World treated him so mean
Treats me mean too.³

To understand Jesus from the social location of the poor is to create a sacred space where the marginalized can grapple with their spiritual need to reconcile their God with their struggle for justice and dignity. For many who read the Bible from the margins, Jesus' poverty is attested by the sacrifice offered by his parents at his birth. According to Luke, "And when the days of [Mary] cleansing were fulfilled according to the Law of Moses . . . [they] offered a sacrifice according to the Law of the Lord, a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons" (2:22-24). The law as stated in the twelfth chapter of the book of Leviticus required her to offer a lamb for her child, but if she could not afford one, then the sacrifice would be two turtledoves or two young pigeons. Mary made use of the offering of the poor.

Jesus' poverty was not limited to his birth. Jesus lived the life of an itinerant preacher, a life marked by privation. Referring to himself in Luke, Jesus would say, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the heaven nests, but the Son of man has nowhere to lay

his head" (9:58). He wandered throughout Judea without money in his purse. Several incidents indicating Jesus' lack of funds are recorded in the biblical text. For example, when questioned if he paid the didrachma (Temple tax), Jesus instructed Peter to find the necessary funds to pay the tax in the mouth of the first fish Peter hooked (Matt. 17:22-27). When asked if one should pay tribute to Caesar, Jesus asked to be shown a tribute coin rather than producing one himself (Luke 20:20-26). In order to survive financially, Jesus relied on the charity of others. "He traveled through every city and village . . . and the twelve were with him, also certain women . . . who were ministering to him of their possessions" (Luke 8:1-3).

Jesus also stressed his solidarity with the ultradisenfranchised by referring to himself as the good shepherd, as recorded in John 10:1-11. Today, when we think of a shepherd, we envision a wise, humble pastor who lovingly cares for his flock. Unfortunately, that was not how people saw shepherds during Jesus' time. No social status was so limited and tenuous, so close to no status at all, as that of the shepherd. The shepherd lived apart from what was considered civilization, among the company of the most miserable outcasts of society. From the margins, the shepherd occupied a slave-like space, usually guarding someone else's flock with his or her life.⁴

Then, too, Jesus came from the uncelebrated region of Galilee. Nazareth was so insignificant to the religious life of Judaism that the Hebrew Bible never mentions it. If it was not for Jesus being a Nazarene, Galilee may have been just another unknown and unimportant region of the world. To come from Galilee was considered by most in Jerusalem as being uncouth. The people of Jesus' time had such a low opinion of this provincial region that, according to John, when the multitudes discovered Jesus' origins, they exclaimed before abandoning him, "Are you not also from Galilee? Search the Scriptures and see that no prophet out of Galilee has been raised" (7:52-53). John also gives us the example of Nathaniel, one of Jesus' future disciples, who, upon learning Jesus was from Nazareth, showed his contempt by saying, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" (1:46).

Can any good thing come out of the ghetto? Can any good thing come out of the *barrio*? Jesus came from the impure and

mixed neighborhood of his time. No decent, respectable member of the center of society comes from *those* types of neighborhoods. Indeed, Jesus knows what it means to come from the "wrong side of the tracks"! Because he experienced the cultural bias of being from the margins of society, oppressed and poor people, including those of color, are able to find solidarity with their God.

To understand the message of Jesus, we are forced to look toward the margins of this society, to identify the heirs of Jesus' ministry. The writer of the epistle of James reminds us that God chose those who were poor: "Hear my beloved, did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs to the reign which God promised to those loving God?" (2:5). It is to them that the reign of God is promised. It is they who can lead the center toward salvation, a concept that will be explored in greater detail in chapter 6. For now, it will suffice to stress that Christian churches that refuse to interpret biblical texts from the perspective of those who first heard the Gospels, the poor, end up fabricating interpretations that tend to spiritualize the gospel message and then refuse to deal literally with how those original hearers understood Christ.

For example, in Luke 12:16-21 Jesus tells the parable about a rich man who, having had a good harvest, decided to tear down his barns and build bigger ones to store his grain, thinking he could rest secure in his fortunes. Yet Jesus called him a fool because that very night he died and his riches did not save him; instead, they were left for others to enjoy. It appears as if Jesus is condemning people who attempt to forecast their potential gain, and position themselves so as to maximize on their investment by increasing storage space, even though they would be considered shrewd entrepreneurs by most of today's capitalist society. Today, we might want such an individual to serve as a deacon or elder of our church, convinced that our churches could use more business-savvy leadership. Regardless, Jesus calls such persons fools. Remember, this is the same Jesus who in Matthew 5:22 tells us not to call anyone a fool lest we be answerable by hell's fire! By the use of such strong language, Jesus castigates the person whom our present society elevates. In order to reconcile Jesus' harsh judgment with our capitalist social location, we must spiritualize the parable, interpreting it so that the sin is not hoarding resources that could be shared

with those who had none but rather is relying on the individual to succeed instead of God. This metaphorical reading reinterprets the action of hoarding as the core of the sin and reduces it to the individual motivation of the person.

But those who read the Bible literally, those who live on the margins of society, instead agree with Jesus' pronouncement that this rich person is a fool. There exists the realization that those who hoard their profits usually believe that they have earned their wealth and thus are entitled to their riches and beholden to no one. This is what makes them fools. Missing from this analysis, however, is how societal privilege opens doors to one ethnic group at the expense of other groups.

I recall a student who insisted that his father's economic success, his rags-to-riches testimony, was due solely to his entrepreneurial skills. I simply asked one question: If his father were a black Latino, would he have been able to achieve the same level of success? Would he have had access to adequate public education, normally available in white suburban neighborhoods? Would he have been hired by his company for a managerial position? If hired, how many people on the margins would end up working in top administrative posts in the company, or would his color or ethnicity prevent him from passing the glass ceiling? Would he have gotten the necessary funding from the local bank to set out on his own? The student was forced to recognize that whiteness provided a privilege that contributed directly or indirectly to his father's success. If his father stores his profit believing that he has pulled himself up by his bootstraps, like the fool in Jesus' parable, the day will come when he will have to give an account for himself. He will have to reckon with his complicity with societal structures designed to privilege him at the expense of others whose skin pigmentation or ethnic background deprive them of the opportunities taken for granted by the dominant culture.

A HISPANIC CHRIST

José was a simple man who worked with his hands. He built things. He tried to make a living as a carpenter, but times were hard and taxes were high. Regardless of the foreign military occupation of his homeland, there simply was no time for him to become involved

with any of those revolutionary groups doing maneuvers and hiding in the wilderness. He just worked hard, barely keeping food on the table for his rapidly growing family. Although a newlywed for less than nine months, his wife María had already given birth to his first child, a healthy boy. On this particular night, José was scared. He ran through the sleeping town, silently making his way toward his makeshift home, praying and hoping that he wasn't too late. He had to save his family from certain death! He burst into his shack and went straight to the sleeping mats on the dirt floor. "*Despierta mi amor*, wake up my love," José told his wife as he gently shook her. "A messenger just warned me that *la milicia*, the militia, will be coming for us. I fear we will disappear! *Aprátate*, hurry up, we must leave this moment for a safer land, far from the reaches of this brutal dictatorship." There was no time to pack any belongings or personal mementoes, nor was there time to say goodbye to friends and family. In the middle of the night, literally a few steps before the National Guard, José took his small family into *el exilio*, exile. They would come to a foreign country, wearing only the clothes on their backs. Even though they could not speak the language nor understand the strange customs and idiosyncracies of the dominant culture, at least they were physically safe. Salvation for this poor family was found *south* of the border.

Over two thousand years ago this family arrived in Egypt as political refugees, fleeing the tyrannical regime of Herod. Over forty years ago my own father came home to his wife, my mother, with similar news. Because of his involvement with the former political regime, he was now a fugitive of the newly installed government. If caught, he would face certain death. They gathered me, their six-month-old son, and headed north, arriving in this country literally with only the clothes on their backs. Like Jesus, I too was a political refugee, a victim of circumstances beyond my comprehension or control. My Jesus knows my pain of being a foreigner in an alien land. Jesus understands what it means to be seen as inferior because he too was from a culture different from the dominant one. I have no doubt that Jesus wept as a child for the same reasons I did. For me to see Jesus as a refugee is more than to locate my story in the biblical narrative. Rather, the story of Jesus becomes my story as I move from my social location to the biblical text. In short, I discover a Savior who knows the fears and

frustrations of a small alien boy because Jesus also experienced those same fears and frustrations.

Latino/as, even though they have lived for hundreds of years on the land that would eventually become the United States, are still seen as aliens, exiles, and outsiders—people who are marginalized because they are perceived as not belonging. Many find themselves in the United States because of the quasi-religious ideology of Manifest Destiny, when the United States conquered foreign lands, as in the case of northern Mexico and Puerto Rico. The presence of these Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in the United States is a direct consequence of this country's aggressive territorial expansion. They awoke one day to find that the borders had moved, making them aliens on their own lands. Others are here as a result of gunboat diplomacy, as in the case of people from Central America and the Caribbean. During the twentieth century, many countries were invaded at least once by the U.S. Marines, whose mission usually involved overthrowing the country's government (even when elected by the people) to impose a government more willing to protect U.S. interests. For example, bananas were unknown in the United States prior to the twentieth century; yet by the early 1900s they were a common commodity. U.S. businesses established large plantations throughout Central and South America and used the U.S. Marines to establish puppet governments committed to protect U.S. trade; hence the term "banana republic." Territorial invasions and the exploitation of the natural resources by U.S. corporations led to conditions that eventually fostered the people's immigration to the imperial center. They find themselves as refugees and aliens in the country responsible for their being here. Even their descendants are not spared the indignation of being seen as foreigners, regardless of how many generations have inhabited the land. Their Latino/a physical features or Hispanic surnames make them a race that doesn't belong. For this reason, many anglicize their names to belong, a process familiar to Saul of Tarsus.

Many Euroamericans have heard eloquent sermons on how Saul, the persecutor of Christians, met Jesus on the road to Damascus, only to be converted to Paul the apostle. Saul's spiritual conversion led to a name change. While a charming interpretation, it ignores what the Bible actually says. After his encounter with the

living Christ, the text goes on to say that Saul was converted and went to Jerusalem, where he met Barnabas and the twelve apostles. Saul went to Tarsus and Antioch, became a church leader, and then set out on his first missionary journey. In other words, Saul was a Christian. It is when Saul begins his missionary ventures that the book of Acts begins to refer to Saul as Paul. Saul, like so many Latino/as, had two names. One was used within his own culture, Saul the Jew, and one he used in the dominant culture, Paul the Roman citizen. Saul doesn't become Paul because of spiritual conversion; rather Saul *is* Paul, a product of a cultural *mestizaje*, a mixing together (Acts 8–9, 11, 13).⁵

Latino/as, like Saul/Paul, are viewed as a "half-breed" people. They are not considered pure members of the dominant culture because of their racial mixture, *mestizaje*. Hispanics are products of Iberian Europe, Native America, Africa, Asia, and, because of their presence in this country, North America. The mark of being Latina/o is a *mestizaje* that makes U.S. Hispanics heirs to several cultures yet seldom trusted or accepted by any of them—perpetual insiders and outsiders of five continents. The perceived stain of *mestizaje* makes Latino/as an object of disdain to the race-conscious dominant culture. The process of *mestizaje* began when the Spaniards conquered the Western Hemisphere. *Mestizos*, the offspring of the natural miscegenation that followed, became a pejorative term used toward people who fall short of the white ideal. Laws were passed to limit the mixture of races lest it undermine the barriers erected to separate "superior" cultures from "inferior" ones.⁶ This mixture of cultures is not limited to the European conquest of the Americas. It continues when the mixed products of that violent clash attempt to define themselves within the United States.

Jesus' ethnic purity was also suspect as his contemporaries questioned his "legitimacy." A controversy within the early Christian church revolved around the *mestizaje* of Jesus. Jesus was accused of being the bastard child of the Jew Mary and a Roman soldier named Panthera. The title Jesus ben Panthera (Jesus son of Panthera) is not uncommon in rabbinical writings. The third-century theologian Origen makes a reference to this gossip when he writes,

Let us return, to the words put into the mouth of the Jew, where the mother of Jesus is described as having been turned out by the carpenter who was betrothed to her, as she had been convicted of adultery and had a child by a certain soldier named Panthera.⁷

The hint of impurity was sufficient grounds for excluding an individual from the congregation. According to Deuteronomy: "A bastard shall not enter the congregation of the Lord; even to his tenth generation shall he not enter into the Lord's congregation" (23:2). Religious leaders simply could not be suspected of *mestizaje*.

While I am not questioning the doctrine of the virgin birth, it is clear that many, specifically those who rejected Jesus' claim of messiahship, also rejected the claim that Mary gave birth to him while still a virgin. The real issue is that the gossip concerning Jesus' father made Jesus impure in the eyes of the "pure" Jewish race. If racial mixture for them meant impurity, then Jesus knew the pain and humiliation of being seen constantly as less than human because he was rumored to be biracial.

AN AMERINDIAN CHRIST

As the Amerindians of the Caribbean islands faced extinction, a missionary priest named Bartolomé de Las Casas attempted to defend the indigenous population from the European onslaught. Called to be a witness of Christ to the "godless" Amerindians, he realized that it was he who was living without God. For Las Casas, spiritual salvation was equated with the establishment of social justice, thereby inverting the relationship between the "Christ-bearing" Europeans and the "demonic" Amerindian heathens. It was the Spaniards who risked losing salvation because of their unjust treatment of the native population. Conversion for him ceased to be a simple profession of faith; rather conversion became an act or process by which one came to know Christ through seeking solidarity with the marginalized. This led him to write, "I leave in the Indies Jesus Christ, our God, scourged and afflicted and beaten and crucified not once, but thousands of times, when the Spaniards devastated and destroyed its people."⁸ Over 450 years later, during the 1989 visit of Pope John Paul II to the Shrine of the Cana-

dian Martyrs in Midland, Ontario, the Pope concluded his remarks by stating, "Not only is Christianity relevant to the Indian peoples, but Christ, in the members of his body, is himself Indian."⁹

The invading Europeans are not the ones who brought Christ to the so-called New World because Christ was already there. For both Las Casas and Pope John Paul II, Christ could be found among Amerindians, partly because of the oppression they suffered. Jesus Christ exists among an indigenous people who have historically been scourged by those wanting their land. Native American Christians believe that the Amerindian Christ reveals himself in the brokenness and suffering of all Amerindians who are lost between the world of their traditional habitat, from which they were separated by the Europeans, and Western culture. Amerindian Christians seek to find harmony between the biblical text, the teachings of Jesus, and the traditional wisdom of their elders.¹⁰ These Christian Amerindians insist that if we want to find Christ, we need to look into the faces of the people that were systematically decimated. But *how* could Amerindians have Christ among them before they heard the story of Jesus?

In Acts 17:16-34, Paul encountered an altar in Athens with the inscription "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD." He addressed the Athenians, stating that he had come to introduce them to this God whom they worship but do not yet know. Paul explained that because God created the world and all that is within it, God is Lord of all the earth and does not reside in any temple or church made by human hands. Because this Creator "made every nation of one blood to dwell on all the face of the earth," God determined the bounds and time for their habitation. Hence, all people should "seek the Lord if perhaps they may feel God and find God, for God is never far from any one person." In God all humanity lives, moves, and has its being, and at the appointed time, God will bring people to a fuller revelation of Godself. Like the Athenians, Amerindians knew God prior to learning God's name, because Christ is for all people, incarnated in the history and religious ceremonies of the indigenous people. For example, among the Monagnais Nations located in Canada, the Amerindian Christ is a Christ who comes to save all people who open their hearts to Jesus. The elders would say that before they knew the God of Jesus Christ, they nevertheless prayed to this God, for God had already revealed

Godself to the Amerindians prior to the arrival of the white race. The Amerindians may not have yet recognized the importance of the cross or baptism, but regardless God, the Creator of all, was still guiding them.

In spite of God's movement among the Amerindians, Christian missionaries attempted to "Christianize the heathens." Even when done with the best of intentions, their religious endeavors contributed to the oppression of the indigenous people and eventually led to their downfall. It is important to recognize that those who brought the gospel to the Amerindians did so at a terrible cost to the indigenous population. Individuals like Las Casas or Henry Benjamin Whipple (a Catholic and a Protestant), who were heralded as defenders of the Indians, still contributed to their ultimate annihilation, in spite of their heartfelt convictions and intentions. Las Casas was responsible for creating the "reduction" paradigm for missionary conquest, which physically separated Amerindians from their families and communities, forcing them to live on the mission compound under the spiritual (and political) tutelage of the civilized Europeans. Whipple engineered the stealing of the Black Hills from the Sioux nation, thus bringing an end to their resistance. While these Christians may deserve recognition for criticizing the genocidal sins of the dominant culture, they also deserve condemnation for their racist assumption that European white society was superior to that of the indigenous people. Regardless of their good intentions toward the welfare of the Amerindians, they, along with most missionaries to the Amerindian nations, failed to question how they fused and confused the message of the Bible with the values of their European culture, a blindness that led to the cultural genocide of those they hoped to defend.¹¹

Cultural genocide of Amerindian life is as catastrophic to the people as military eradication, yet less perceptible. Whether intentionally or not, cultural genocide eradicates the integrity and worth of a people, an integrity and worth that served as the basis for their value system and their identity.¹² When ceremonial religious rituals were outlawed, like the Hopi Snake Dance or the plains Sun Dance, or when a warrior's conversion to Christ was measured by the length of his hair, then the imposition of the white Christ as defined by Euroamerican society led to the death of a people's soul and the obliteration of a people's culture.

"Without vision, my people perish," warns the prophet Hosea (4:6). As cultural genocide destroys the vision of a people, it turns them into nonpersons. The destruction of Amerindian life was not limited to the original conquest, which caused physical death. Many Amerindians who physically survived learned to view themselves as second-class citizens who *deserved* to occupy the bottom rungs of society's economic ladder. Powerless and dispossessed of their ancestral lands, Amerindians lost their identity as many began to see themselves in the way those from the dominant culture saw them. This process, which is not limited to the Amerindian experience, leads the marginalized group to internalize the illusion of inferiority constructed by the dominant culture while idealizing the white culture and its religious manifestations (including how it reads the Bible). This process of internalization usually leads toward self-hatred and the self-imposition of oppressive structures. While some Amerindians reject the message of liberation found in the Gospels, due mostly to how the symbol of the white Jesus continues to be linked to the death of their culture and ancestors, others are rediscovering the ways of their ancestors, learning to worship Jesus through their own cultural symbols.

For example, a present-day medicine man sees his work and that of Jesus to be similar in their attitude toward evil. When evil is given importance, it increases. Jesus teaches that when confronted, evil should be left to God, who can always be trusted and will never lose. Healing ceases to be simply physical. It also becomes a spiritual and psychological process that leads toward harmony. Both Jesus and the medicine man teach that the most important thing to learn from evil is that the beauty of life rests in living in harmony with God through brother Jesus who shows God's goodness.¹³

AN ASIAN AMERICAN CHRIST

The Christ originally introduced to the Asian community was a Christ understood through a culture defined by a Western ethos. The avarice of the West to colonize the "exotic" lands of the East created a Christ and a biblical understanding steeped in the imperialist and colonialist mind-set. A biblical rendering that assumes and demonstrates a European superiority creates a Christ who is complicit with the colonialist venture, a Christ responsible for

justifying political structures that cause misery and death. For Christ to be Asian or Asian American, he, along with the Bible, must first be "decolonialized."

A colonialized Bible tends to romanticize the plight of the poor, even to the point of making the condition of the oppressed the model for the victims of racism, classism, and sexism. In Mark 12:41-44 (repeated in Luke 21:1-4) we are told the story of a poor widow who gives all that she has to the Temple.

String opposite the [Temple's] treasury, Jesus watched how the crowd cast copper coins into the treasury. Many rich people cast in much, but one poor widow came and cast two lepta, which is a quadrans. Having called his disciples close to him, Jesus said, "Truly I say to you that this poor widow cast more than all those casting into the treasury. For all cast out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty cast all, as much as she had, her whole livelihood."

The widow is generally idealized by the dominant culture as an example of Christian behavior for those who are poor, with her self-sacrifice compared with that of the self-indulgence of the religious leaders.

Yet, for some Asian Americans, this interpretation maintains societal power relationships that are detrimental to the oppressed. In Mark's account, the story of the widow's offering is preceded by Jesus' outrage toward the religious leaders who devour the possessions of widows. Mark states, "And [Jesus] said to them, . . . [the religious leaders are] devouring the houses of the widows under the pretense of praying at length" (12:38-40). In Luke's account, Jesus concludes the story of the widow's offering with his prediction of the Temple's destruction. Luke states, "Some were speaking about the Temple, that it was decorated with stones and gifts. He said, 'These things you see, days will come when one stone will not be left on a stone'" (21:5-6). Reading Mark and Luke together, we discover that Jesus is not praising the widow's offering as a paragon to be imitated by those who are marginalized; rather Jesus is denouncing a religious social structure that cons the widow out of the little she has.¹⁴

To side with the widows of the world becomes the appropriate action for *minjung*. *Minjung* is an untranslatable Korean word made up of two characters: *min*, which means "people," and *jung*, which means "mass." The word refers to all people who are marginalized and oppressed. When the poor are overburdened by economic structures designed to benefit the rich, then they belong to the *minjung*. When one race of people is dominated by another race so that the more powerful can extract cheap labor and resources, then they belong to the *minjung*. When one gender is domesticated by the other so as to serve the interests of those whom society says are the superior gender, then they belong to the *minjung*. *Minjung* theology is the theology of the colonized people, of those who are economically, politically, sexually, and socially oppressed. Jesus too belongs to the *minjung*, for throughout his earthly ministry he was followed by these masses of oppressed people; he ate with them, healed them, fed them, identified with them, and proclaimed God's liberation to them. A *minjung* reading of the Bible has its foundation in the life events of Jesus, events based not on power but powerlessness, events that sought justice for the disenfranchised. These events become the foundation for rereading the history of Asians and understanding what biblically based actions are required for liberation.¹⁵

A BLACK CHRIST

The only whites recorded in the Gospel story were the white colonizers from Rome. With certainty we can conclude that Jesus was not Aryan. Does this mean then that he belonged to another racial group or perhaps was black? For some black religious leaders like Albert Cleage, a Detroit pastor who ministers in a black ghetto church, Jesus' actual skin pigmentation was black. He was a black man who arose from the Black Nation of Israel. Cleage, along with some biblical scholars, insist that Jesus belonged to the nonwhite tribe of Judah, a mixture of different dark-skinned people groups who freely mixed with those of Africa. Hence Mary, Jesus' mother, was a black woman. Likewise, God is black. If God is Jesus' father, and if humans are created in the image of God, and if humans come in different colors, then these colors must find their source in God.

Now, if these different colors exist in God, then God cannot be white, based on how Euroamericans legally and socially define whiteness. By definition, according to Cleage, the son of a black God who was born to a black Mary is also black in the same way African Americans are defined as black in the United States. Cleage maintains that Jesus would not have been able to pass the "one-drop" rule, which defines blackness as having one drop of African blood flowing in your veins.

Other African American theologians, such as James Cone and J. Deotis Roberts, understand Christ's blackness as symbolic. For Cone, the inability of finite humans to capture the Infinite Being forces humans to use words as symbols, which always fall short in communicating the complete essence of the divine. A black Christ becomes the best way to represent Christ to African Americans struggling to survive in a racist society. Hence, Cone insists that Jesus' blackness is informed by his identification with the oppressed and despised people of the world, "the least of my people." Like Cone, Roberts also understands Jesus' blackness as symbolic. Yet, while Cone points to Jesus' blackness to emphasize Christ's particular relationship with African Americans, Roberts underscores Jesus' blackness to emphasize Christ's universal relationship with all of humanity. He attempts to meet a psychocultural need to claim self-worth for a people who are on their knees worshipping a Deity formed in the image of their historic oppressors. For Roberts, African Americans have a right to comprehend Jesus as black in the same way that white, red, yellow, and brown people have a right to comprehend Jesus in their own likeness. His call for a "universal" Christ will, he hopes, lead to long-lasting reconciliation among different people groups.

All three views agree that Jesus' blackness, whichever way that blackness is to be defined or envisioned, debunks blackness as something to be abhorred. Because the divine is black, Christ's identification with the struggle of African Americans is affirmed, and Christ's commitment to black liberation is emphasized.¹⁶ To say that Jesus is black becomes more than promoting a notion that his ethnicity is of black origins. Skin color is *not* what is important. Jesus is black because blackness has historically been the color of oppression in this country; thus Christ's blackness is his ultimate expression of solidarity with marginality.

For all readers, the Scriptures are normally interpreted on the basis of the social location of the interpreter, in light of the interpreter's privilege or lack thereof. African Americans, more so than the dominant culture, identify with Jesus' humanity, specifically the communal aspects of the suffering Messiah, who suffered like so many African Americans did and do today. Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection become salvific motifs for the black experience. Yet this same Jesus, who willingly shares in the death-causing plight of the marginalized, also rose from the ultimate conclusion of oppression, death. This same Jesus is present in the lives of today's sufferers and will return to judge those who benefit from the unjust social structures that cause suffering. A black Christ thus stands in contrast to a white Christ and to a focus on the resurrection as "the beginning of a triumphalist church tradition that protects the status quo."¹⁷

A FEMALE CHRIST

In the previous chapter we reviewed how women in the Hebrew Bible were perceived as possessions who existed to meet the physical, emotional, economic, and sexual needs of men. They could be readily sacrificed for the sake of men's survival. Their ultimate function was to become vessels that carried the seeds of men. Hence the greatest shame a woman could ever bear was barrenness. This is evident in the story of Hannah as recorded in 1 Samuel 1. Because Hannah was barren, she was taunted by her husband's other wife. Bitter in her soul, she wept and refused to eat. She entered the Temple to ask for the only thing that would make her humanity whole, a man-child. Women find their fulfillment in life by the process of birthing great holy men (not women). If not, the shame of barrenness becomes so great that it leads women like Rachel, Jacob's wife, to exclaim in Genesis, "Give me sons, and if there are none, I shall die!" (30:2).

Good women are blessed with fertility. The so-called bad girls of the Bible are those who lacked the seriousness to be used by God to birth great men, heirs of God's promise. Even when women chose to break out of the restricted social space designated for them, as in the case of Mary of Magdala, we question their reputation. For example, what was Mary of Magdala's prior profession?

Did you say she was a prostitute? If you did, you are not alone. Yet nowhere in the Bible does it say Mary of Magdala was a prostitute. Where then did we get this idea?

According to all three Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 27:55–56; Mark 15:40–41; Luke 24:10), Mary of Magdala is mentioned first among Jesus' female disciples. Her role (along with other women) must have been important enough to be included as equal to the twelve male apostles. Luke states,

Afterwards he traveled through every city and village, preaching and announcing the gospel of God's reign, and the twelve [apostles] were with him as well as certain women who were healed from evil spirits and infirmities: Mary being called Magdala from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others who ministered to him from their possessions. (8:1–3)

In several apocryphal New Testament writings (e.g., the *Gospel of Philip*), Mary is characterized as an apostle who received revelations from the risen Christ. Contrary to tradition, which credits Peter as being the first witness of the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:4–6), Mary of Magdala was the first person to whom the risen Lord appeared and the first person to proclaim the Good News of the resurrection (Mark 16:9–10). In other writings, like the *Gospel of Mary*, she is referred to as the Apostle of the Apostles, for her rousing sermon to the despondent disciples after Christ's ascension.¹⁸ No doubt, the biblical text and the early writings of the first church testify to the leadership position she held. Nonetheless, as the early Christian church reverted to patriarchal structures, the need arose to discredit Mary of Magdala so as to disqualify her position of authority within the church. Hence, the church tradition arose that she was a prostitute.

Mary of Magdala is not the only female leader of the Bible discredited by the early church's patriarchal hierarchy. John 4 tells the story of the Samaritan woman at the well. This woman has also been traditionally labeled a prostitute because she had five husbands and she was not married to the one she was presently with. She did not leave these men; she did not have the right. It was they who left her, and in a patriarchal society, she was in dire need of a

new man who could provide for her basic survival needs. Although her situation was the result of the actions of these men and nowhere does the text state that she was a prostitute, we have been historically taught to characterize her as a harlot. Could it be because this is the first person to whom Jesus claims his messiahship, leading her to become the first citywide evangelist? Hence she too was discredited lest other women in the church use her as a model in claiming their spiritual calling to lead. After all, if the woman at the well and Mary of Magdala were prostitutes, how could they serve as paragons to emulate (although Jesus associated with prostitutes and promised his reign to them)?

Yet, in spite of this ingrained social bias toward women, Jesus attempted to debunk patriarchy. In Luke, we are told of an incident that involved two of Jesus' disciples, Martha and Mary:

And in their travels it occurred that [Jesus] entered into a certain village. A certain woman by the name of Martha who sat at the feet of Jesus to hear his words. But Martha was distracted with all the serving and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister left me alone to serve? Tell her then that she should help me." Answering her, Jesus said, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things when there is need of only one, and Mary chose the good part, which shall not be taken from her." (10:38–42)

Many sermons have been based on this text. For many, the main message is the need for believers not to worry about all the cares of this world (e.g., housework) as did Martha but, rather, to take the time to be with Jesus as did Mary. While such a message is uplifting, it falls short of uncovering the radical dismantling of a patriarchal system that was undertaken by Jesus. Through his actions, he denounced the assumption that women had no place in religious life. In fact, according to the wisdom of the time, if there was only one Torah left in the world and it fell into the hands of a woman to care for, it would have been better that the Torah be destroyed than have a woman touch it. This type of attitude led pious Jewish men to begin their morning prayers thanking God that God did not make them a Gentile, a slave, or a woman.

Did this attitude toward women influence how women are remembered by the male writers of the Gospels? The text indicates that Martha was distracted by her serving duties. The Greek word Luke uses in the text for serving is *diakonia*. Nowhere in Luke's story does it tell us that Martha was serving in the kitchen doing "woman's work," which is how this narrative is usually interpreted. Her duties in serving, more than likely, corresponded with the office of church deacon established in Acts 6:1-6. Luke (who also authored Acts) indicates that among the first deacons of the church (if not the first), upon which future ones would be modeled, is this woman. Martha's preoccupation with serving dealt with her duties and responsibilities toward the house-church that met at her home, leaving her little time to also "sit at Jesus' feet."

Mary is also a disciple who serves and proclaims God's message, but on this day she chose "to sit at Jesus' feet." The Bible is not interested in telling us that there were no chairs available in the room, so Mary was left sitting on the floor. Rather, to study at the feet of a teacher was a euphemism indicating that the person who is sitting is the student or disciple of a master, a role reserved for men. For example, in Acts 22:3 the same phrase describes Paul's relation to his teacher Gamaliel. The text says Paul studied "at the feet of Gamaliel." Hence, Mary not only touched Torah, she also read and studied it! Furthermore, these two sisters are portrayed in the Gospel of John as well-known apostolic figures of the early church who were beloved by Christ (11:5). Parallel to Peter's confession of Jesus' messiahship (Matt. 16:15-19), Martha also served as a spokesperson for the early church according to John 11:27. Additionally, through Mary's evangelism, many came to believe in Jesus (John 11:45).¹⁹ These women were hearers, servers, and proclaimers of the word.

Let's now reread the story through the eyes of women. The rabbi Jesus was received in the home of one of his apostles named Martha, who also served as founder and deacon of the house-church in Bethany where she proclaimed God's word. On this day her sister Mary the evangelist sat at the feet of Jesus to study Torah. Martha asked the rabbi to have his student help with the duties required by the deacon, but the rabbi responded that studying Torah was just as important as serving.

The radicalness of this narrative affirms leadership positions

assumed by women during Jesus' earthly ministries, even though it was considered blasphemous by the more legalistic religious leaders of his time. Such a reading should not lead the reader to assume that Christianity's treatment of women was more liberating than the Jewish treatment of women, only that Jesus' actions attempted to dismantle patriarchal structures. However, the men who led the post-Pentecost Christian church were quick to forget Jesus' example and reverted to patriarchal models.

Regardless of how we interpret Jesus' solidarity with women, for several feminists, as long as Christ remains a male, it is difficult for women to find a Savior who has experienced the trials and tribulations distinctive to women. What then does it mean to have a female Christ? This does not imply an androgynous Christ, for Jesus was born male, with masculine sexual organs. What is meant by a female Christ is that he was symbolically female. In the same way that we can talk about an economically marginalized Christ, a Hispanic Christ, an Amerindian Christ, an Asian American Christ, and a black Christ, we can also talk about a female Christ. But is Jesus' symbolic femaleness enough? For some feminist theologians, like Mary Daly, the maleness attached to Jesus makes the problem of finding salvation in a male Savior overwhelming.²⁰ Other feminist scholars, like Rosemary Ruether, insist that in spite of Jesus' male gender, he stood against all forms of hierarchical systems that privileged one group at the expense of another. These systems include patriarchal structures.²¹ Because Jesus continues to be incarnated among "the least of my people," Jesus is a woman. He can be understood as being female because there is no distinction between male and female in Christ and because at times he referred to the Deity's characteristics in the feminine.

First, Jesus can be perceived in the feminine because the biblical text teaches that in Christ there is no male or female. The pre-occupation with making the male perspective the central lens by which Christ is identified and understood prevents the inclusiveness of Christ that Paul calls for in Galatians, where he turns the morning Jewish prayer of thanksgiving mentioned above on its head: "For as many as were baptized in Christ, you put on Christ, so there is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, for you are all one in Christ" (3:27-28). When Paul calls the church to form one body in Christ, that body is composed of both males and

females who participate in the living, dying, and resurrection of Christ. This participation, not the replication of sexual features, becomes the model for Christ's image.

In Acts 9:1–5 Saul was traveling to Damascus to persecute the early Christian church when he was blinded by a light that knocked him to the ground. He heard a voice asking, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" This narrative begins by informing the reader of Saul's motive for going to Damascus, to arrest followers of the early church. The text specifically states that Saul was looking for "men or women" to persecute. So, when Saul asks who it is that he is persecuting, the response is, "I am Jesus, and you are persecuting me." This passage clearly teaches that Jesus is the persecuted church, male and female, without distinction. Historically, Jesus may be male, but his sacramental identification with the persecuted makes them identical with Christ. If, however, Jesus' historical maleness is interpreted as essential to his deistic identity and redemptive functions, then Christ is religiously construed to marginalize women.²²

Jesus can also be viewed as female because a feminine image of the Deity appears in several places throughout the Bible. Humans can never fathom the total mystery of the Deity. There exists no symbol, word, concept, or idea perceivable by humans that totally encompasses the essence of God. The best we can do is to describe the Deity in human-constructed words that fall short of completely and thoroughly describing that which no mind can totally comprehend. Hence we say God is a consuming fire, God is a vineyard owner, or God is a father. While these words are insufficient to describe God, they do provide a glimpse into the eternal Creator. Likewise, there exist feminine words and symbols that the Bible uses to describe the Deity. For example, in Isaiah, the prophet writes, "I [God] have forever kept silence. I was quiet and refrained myself. I will groan like a woman in labor, I will pant and I will gasp" (42:14).²³ Jesus picks up this imagery and refers to the other two members of the Trinity in the feminine. Of the Spirit, Jesus says in John 3:6 that to be a Christian, one must emerge from the Spirit's womb, that is, be "born again." The Spirit, like a woman in labor, gives birth to those who become new creatures in Christ. When speaking about God's mercy in Luke 15, Jesus likens God to the father of a prodigal son, a shepherd who lost one sheep, and

a woman who has lost her coin. God is Father, God is Shepherd, God is Woman.

Again, as mentioned in chapter 4, God is beyond gender. For this reason, Pope John Paul I was able to proclaim, "We know [God] always has his eyes open on us, even when it seems to be dark. God is our father; even more God is our mother."²⁴ Nevertheless, many feminist theologians have raised concerns about praising the Deity's feminine side by idealizing a romantic notion of motherhood. If "mother" becomes the only attribute projected upon the Deity, then a patriarchal ideology is maintained, where being a woman is reduced to bearing and rearing children.

In addition to the concerns raised by some feminist scholars, some black feminists, better known as "womansists," insist that their white counterparts have not seriously considered the dimensions of racism (and classism) within the women's movement. White feminists' goals and objectives do not always consider the needs of African American women. Likewise, a theological understanding of Christ is different when considered from within the black community.

For womanists like Jacquelyn Grant, five experiences grounded in the black woman's social location demonstrate how Jesus can be liberated from the patriarchy, white supremacy, and economic privilege that imprison Christ. First, Jesus is a cosufferer because he made an option to suffer with the marginalized of his time. Second, Jesus is an equalizer because he came for all humanity. Third, Jesus initiates freedom, remembering that freedom is not defined as becoming equal to the oppressor (what womanists claim white feminists are doing) but as liberation from the oppressor for the women and men of the black community. Fourth, Jesus is the sustainer, a model for the family that has been systematically violated due to slavery and its aftermath. And finally, fifth, Jesus is the liberator because his liberative activities during his earthly ministry empower black women in their own quest for liberation.²⁵

For some Asian feminists, Jesus is the compassionate mother, bearing the sins and suffering of everyone, making him the ultimate symbol for oppressed women on the margins. In some Asian cultures, such as Korea, shamans who liberate people from *han* (the feeling of resentment, helplessness, bitterness, sorrow, and revenge felt deep in the victim's guts) tend to be women. Hence,

Jesus, the compassionate mother, willingly bears the sufferings of the *minjung* and symbolically participates in the feminine activity of healing the *han* of the *minjung*. In Jesus, suffering women identify with the suffering of Jesus not to glorify suffering but rather to find a Deity who understands the pain of oppression and is willing to become one with the sufferer. Jesus weeps and cries out in pain, like so many Asian women who have lost their sons and daughters to foreign Western military aggression or national secret police agencies. When Jesus cried out for Jerusalem in Matthew 23:37, his *han* was so deep that the Gospel writer uses a feminine metaphor, having Jesus refer to himself as a mother hen attempting to gather her brood under her protective wing.²⁶

A GAY CHRIST

On October 6, 1998, in the small Wyoming city of Laramie, a twenty-one-year-old college freshman majoring in political science, named Matthew Shepard, entered the Fireside Bar for a Heineken. He entered the bar alone around ten o'clock, coming from a dinner meeting with friends from the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered Alliance. There he met two individuals to whom Shepard revealed his homosexuality. The two individuals said that they too were gay and invited Shepard to leave with them. A little after midnight, they piled into a pickup truck and Shepard's assault began. He was later found pistol-whipped with a .357 magnum and left for dead, strung up on a split-rail fence along an old dirt road. He died several days later, never recovering from a coma.

During the memorial service, bomb-sniffing dogs combed the church while SWAT teams and police in riot helmets were needed to keep the peace. Anti-gay protestors from different churches chose Shepard's funeral to protest what they perceived to be too much tolerance and too many concessions to the gay community. "We want to inject a little sanity and Gospel truth into what is shaping up to be an orgy of homosexual lies and propaganda" said the Reverend Fred Phelps, a Baptist preacher from Topeka, Kansas, who came with several members of his congregation to protest the memorial service. These church members waved antigay signs, shouted anti-gay slogans, and engaged mourners in loud and nasty debates. One protestor yelled, "Matthew was wicked!" Some of

the signs read, "No Fags in Heaven," "God Hates Fags," and "No Tears for Queers." One young girl, too young to even understand the message she held, carried a sign that read, "Fag = Anal Sex."²⁷

No doubt, many within the overall Christian church have strong negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians. Some Christians encourage violence toward gays and lesbians when they reduce sexual orientation to a disease or sin and encourage a crusade against those whom they perceive God hates. Violence is further advocated when Christians remain silent in the face of the violence experienced by the Shepards of our community. Perpetrators of gay bashing feel themselves justified in enforcing the rules of God and nature, administering justice to those whom God hates. Christians become complicit with the violence they breed due to their attitudes, words, and actions toward "the least of my people."

Historically, biblical texts have been used as clubs to submit gays and lesbians to conformity. Some of the most verbal (and physical) attacks upon gays and lesbians have been generated from the conservative Christian community, as demonstrated during Shepard's funeral. Yet Jesus warns that anyone who calls someone *shaka* will be liable to the Sanhedrin or even hell's fire (Matt. 5:22). Most Bibles translate the Aramaic term *shaka* as "fool" or renegade; however, scholars have suggested that the word could also be translated as "sissy."²⁸ Regardless, Jesus clearly indicates that the many Christians who participate in name-calling are in danger of condemnation. Why? Because all of God's creatures contain the image of God, all have dignity and worth, and all, as part of the creation story, participate in the final words of the sixth day of creation, "And God saw all which God had made, and behold, it was very good" (Gen. 1:31). Gays and lesbians, known by God before they were formed in their mother's womb (Jer. 1:5), are also part of God's creation, and hence, they too are good.

Because of the violence many gays and lesbians face, they must also be considered among "the least of my people." The social pressure to conform to heterosexuality, the tormented experience of an orientation that contrasts with what society considers normative, and the physical danger encountered as hate crimes and gay bashing continue to rise in this nation relegate gays and lesbians to the margins of society. If we say that Jesus is in solidarity with "the least of my people" and if gays find themselves the

victims of oppressive acts, then we must conclude that, to remain faithful to a liberative reading of the Bible, Jesus is gay, not because he has participated in homosexual activities but because what is done to the "the least of my people" is done to Christ. When Matthew Shepard was crucified, Jesus was again crucified.

In Matthew 19:10-12 Jesus proclaims his own celibacy, indicating that he did not partake in any sexual activity; however, for a person who chooses celibacy as a way of glorifying God, sexuality can become a sinful temptation, whether it be heterosexual or homosexual. If this is true, then Hebrews assumes a deeper meaning when it states, "We have one [Jesus] who has been tempted in *every way* that we have, although he is without sin" (4:15). If Jesus was tempted in *every way*, then we must consider that he was tempted with both heterosexuality and homosexuality. Nonetheless, Jesus' gayness is not due to sexuality but to solidarity.

PERCEIVING THE CHARACTER OF DIVINITY

Jesus Christ is the fullest revelation of God to humanity. Not only do we mere humans learn the character of God; through Christ, God learns what it means to suffer under oppression. Because the ultimate Deity has flesh, wounds upon its hands, feet, and side, God understands the pain and suffering of all who also face persecution. The disenfranchised can pray to God about their marginalized existence because God's very incarnation made God one with those who have always been crucified by society. To read the Bible cognizant that Jesus Christ suffered marginality is to rebel against the assumption of the Euroamerican church that the task of all Bible readers is to discover the one single interpretation of the text, which by definition becomes the interpretation of the dominant culture. To read the Bible from the margins debunks these interpretations and unmasks how they have been used historically to justify the power and privilege of the few at the expense of the many.

While the dominant culture may debate the existence of God, people of the margins attempt to ascertain the character of God. Jesus Christ becomes the point of departure in discerning God's character. While the Bible provides crucial revelations of

God's character, we must remember that the Bible is not God. To assert the biblical text as divine borders on heresy in the same way that the Israelites confused the raised bronzed serpent with God.²⁹ The purpose of the Bible is to give testimony to Christ's liberative and salvific message. The Bible does not save, only God can. This does not minimize or cheapen the importance of the biblical text; it only puts it in its proper relationship to Jesus Christ, by whom we can behold the character of God.

God Sides with Today's Crucified People

I have two children, a ten-year-old boy and a nine-year-old girl. I love both children deeply and would gladly lay down my life for either one of them. Yet they do one thing that drives me crazy. They love to fight, and not a day goes by that they are not arguing over something trivial. Now, my son is about a foot taller than my daughter, a year older, and a bit stronger. When their verbal fights become physical, my son has the clear advantage. He can easily pin her to the ground and use the privilege of his gender and height to win the confrontation. When I see them physically fighting, I step in, pick him up by the nape of his neck, and defend my daughter. Imagine if my son would look at me and say, "Wait a minute, father, you are being unfair. You are choosing sides; specifically, you are choosing her side. As a father who loves us equally, you should not take sides; it is simply unfair." You can imagine my response, "I love you dearly, and my taking her side does not mean I love you any less. However, I will side with the one being abused. I will side with the one being oppressed. Not because I love her more but because she is being oppressed, even if it means that I take a stand against you."

Likewise, Christ sides with those who are being oppressed, those who are today's crucified. This means that Christ takes a stand against those who are oppressing them, that is, those from the dominant culture who, due to unwarranted power and privilege, benefit at the expense of the powerless. Christ stands against oppression and compels his followers to do likewise. Christ resides among those who are suffering oppression, who live in want, who have misery as a companion. These are the "the least of my people," Jesus in the here and now. The poor, the oppressed, and people

of color provide an essential salvific perspective to world history. God chooses those who are oppressed within history and makes them the principal means of salvation for the rest of society, just as God chose the "suffering servant," the crucified Christ, to bring salvation to the world.

For now, suffice to say that God has historically chosen those from the margins of society to be agents of God's new creation. As Matthew 21:42 reminds us, it is the stone rejected by the builders that becomes the keystone of God's handiwork. God did not reveal the divine will to the court of Pharaoh; instead, God chose their slaves, the Hebrews, to reveal God's movement in history. It was not Rome, the most powerful city of the known world, where God chose to perform the miracle of the incarnation, nor was it Jerusalem, the center of Yahweh worship; rather it was impoverished Galilee. This theme of solidarity between the crucified Christ and the victims of oppression makes the people of the margins salvific agents for the recipients of society's power and privilege. Christ is informed by the historical identification of Jesus with those who suffer under oppression. Christ's nonwhiteness is not due to an attempt to be "politically correct," nor to some psychological need of marginalized communities. Jesus is nonwhite because the biblical witness of God is of one who takes sides with those who are oppressed against their oppressors. In our present racist society, people of color are the ones being oppressed, the ones who suffer hunger, thirst, nakedness, alienation, affliction, and incarceration.

In a new world order, for those who are the wretched of the land, Christ ceases to be a religious icon, located somewhere far away in the heavens, who simply listens to prayers begging for blessings or to unanswerable questions about the injustices that accompany humanity. To be an imitator of Christ is to learn how to share each other's pains, to share each other's sufferings, and together share those pains and sufferings with the one who reminds us of the trials and tribulations of this world yet encourages us to be of good cheer, for the world has been overcome through the power of love, manifested in physical deeds of solidarity with "the least of my people." A Christ who does not call us to build God's reign of justice or to seek liberation from all forms of sins, regardless of the cost to our personhood, is a false Christ. Christians are

called upon to show their love for one another, a love rooted in a willingness to lay down their lives for the very least who presently suffer under race, class, and gender oppression.

God Is Victorious

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has taught us that God is foremost a liberator, not just from the narrow constraints of "personal sins" but also from the sins of the whole community that wreak havoc on the lives of those who reside on the margins of society. The resurrection of Jesus Christ on the third day after his crucifixion guarantees victory over the forces of darkness that are bent on imposing structures designed to benefit those with power at the expense of those without. The resurrection insures that while these structures that impose death and misery may appear to triumph in this world, in the end they will crumble. Second, the resurrection also guarantees that Christ is alive, present in this time and space, among the same people with whom he communed during his earthly ministry, "the least of my people." Thus, from the underside of history, where multitudes are forced to suffer under the yoke of domination, the quest to understand Christ becomes a quest for liberation, liberation from racism, classism, and sexism.

Because the experiences of those relegated to the margins of society closely resemble the lot of God's crucified people, their struggle for life and dignity becomes central in interpreting the Christ of the Gospels. To look at a Latino/a Christ, an Amerindian Christ, an Asian Christ, a black Christ, a female Christ, or even a gay Christ subverts the normative white Christ of power and privilege. Just as whites worship a Christ in their own image, it becomes significant to see the divine in the color of those who are oppressed. The white Christ of history has been the Christ who justified the historical reality of conquest, slavery, racism, numerous massacres, imperialism, and colonialism. It was in the name of the white Christ, the Christ who symbolized the protection of white Christian civilization, that atrocities against people on the margins were committed throughout history. For the dominant culture to see and know Jesus, it must search for him among God's crucified people, those most oppressed by structural racism, sexism, and classism. Only then can those with power and privilege find their salvation.

CHAPTER 6

Jesus Saves

Every semester, without fail, one of my students asks *the* limus-test question by which most in my class assess my spirituality and my commitment to the Christian faith. The question simply is, "Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ?" I habitually answer, "No, I have a public relationship with Jesus Christ." This response usually raises eyebrows as my students attempt to figure out what I mean. I hope that my insistence on stressing a "public relationship" instead of a "personal relationship" helps students realize how their question is a product of their generally Euroamerican culture, which shapes their theological understanding of the biblical text.

I attempt to elucidate my comment by telling them about a recent trip I took to Las Vegas. I relate that I took off my wedding ring, gave it to my wife for safekeeping, and told her that I wasn't going to wear it on my trip because we had a personal relationship. No public manifestation of that relationship is necessary to signify what is personal. You can imagine my wife's response! She reminded me that our relationship cannot be reduced to just the personal, for we also share a public, albeit intimate, relationship. The ring is not what makes me married; rather, my act of wearing a ring becomes an outward expression of an inward commitment. It becomes a symbol that publically signifies my faithfulness.

Likewise, my relationship with Jesus Christ is both public and intimate. As the ring is an outward expression of an inward commitment, so too do my actions (praxis) in establishing love and justice become outward expressions of my internal Christian commitment. My praxis becomes the symbolic wedding ring signifying my union with Christ. "By this everyone will know that

you are my disciples: if you have love for one another," Jesus says in John 13:35. In fact, confining Jesus to my personal life becomes the ultimate act of religious selfishness. But then again individualism, guarding the private, is what's most celebrated and prized within the dominant U.S. culture.

Probably to a greater degree than in any other nation, hyper-individuality is a salient characteristic of the U.S. ethos. According to Robert Bellah's groundbreaking sociological work, the individualism commonly expressed in the Euroamerican culture is based on two at times contradictory notions: 1) a belief in the inherent dignity and sacredness of individuals; and 2) a belief in the primary reality of the individual, with society relegated to second place. Social, political, and religious relationships are conducted with the individual at the center. A type of Christianity develops that is private, emphasizing an individually constructed spiritual experience. Hence, it is possible to speak of 275 million religions within the United States, one for each person.¹ As the culture relegates its religious beliefs to a private matter, the danger that can arise is that a form of Christianity, devoid of social responsibility or action, can develop subjected to the general civil will. Eventually the collective goals of society fostered by this hyper-individuality can become interpreted as a religious mandate for all.

Yet Christianity is never private. Among the English-speaking dominant culture, to be private is something to be valued and guarded, reflecting the hyperindividuality of the Euroamerican milieu. Still, among those who speak Spanish, one way of defining the word "private," *privado*, is by its derivation from the word *privar*, "to deprive," from where we get the word *privation*, which is translated as both "deprivation" and "privacy." For the Hispanic, to be private is in fact to be deprived, deprived of family, of friends, or of community. For Latino/as, who stress a communal understanding of their relationship with Christ, terms such as "a personal relationship" can become antitheses to their cultural ethos.

If indeed theology reflects the cultural and philosophical milieu of a people, then we should not be surprised when a highly individualistic society imposes this characteristic on the biblical texts and reduces the human-divine relationship to a personal one. An example of this can be noted in the call to conversion made by Billy Graham, perhaps the best-known evangelist of the second half of the twentieth century. Dr. Graham writes,

If *you* are willing to repent for *your* sins and receive Jesus Christ as *your* Lord and Savior, *you* can do it now. At this moment *you* can . . . say this little prayer: O God, I acknowledge that I have sinned against You. I am sorry for *my* sins. I am willing to turn from *my* sins. I openly receive and acknowledge Jesus Christ as *my* Savior. I confess Him as Lord. From this moment on I want to live for Him and serve Him. In Jesus' name. Amen.²

The first thing that is obvious about this approach is that the relationship is centered on the individual. The individual is the agent of all the verbs used in the above-quoted invitation to become born again. The Deity is either the object of the verb or a possessive pronoun, to be possessed by the individual. Our own language betrays the way in which we place ourselves as the principal actor in the encounter between the individual and the divine. Also to be noted is that the emphasis is on the act of God in Jesus Christ as Savior. No attention is given to Jesus' human actions toward those who were marginalized during his time. Hence no connection is made concerning the obligation of converts toward those who are oppressed today. Those privileged by our social structures are free to continue their quest for power and riches without having to fear for their salvation, regardless of how it affects those who are marginalized.

This is not to minimize or negate the importance of a conversion experience for Christians who claim to have a relationship with Jesus Christ. The danger exists when salvation is reduced solely to an act where the individual makes the choice of accepting Jesus, as if the divine needs our acceptance or recognition to be a force in the lives of humans. One of the religious marks of a hyperindividualistic society is an emphasis on a personal relationship with God. At times, this evangelistic approach ignores the relationship between praxis and faith. Being a Christian is reduced to an issue of belief. Solely to believe in Jesus is sufficient for salvation. While belief is important, if not crucial, it alone is inadequate. This is made clear within the biblical text, as illustrated in the encounter Jesus had with three separate individuals seeking salvation.

THE RICH YOUNG RULER, THE SINNING TAX COLLECTOR, AND THE BEGGING BLIND MAN

Luke 18:18–30 tells of a young man, a member of a leading family, who approaches Jesus, asking the question “Good Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” As a former Southern Baptist pastor of a small rural Kentucky church, I used to live for questions like this and had no doubt as to my response. After leading the seeker through “Roman’s road to salvation” outlined in Paul’s letter to the Romans, I would guide them through a sinner’s prayer (similar to the one in Dr. Graham’s book); have them walk down the church aisle, make a public profession, and join the church; admonish them to give up drinking and carousing; and get them baptized the following Sunday. Depending on denominational association, this is how many ministers throughout the United States would have answered the question of the young man in Luke.

Fortunately, Jesus does not give this response. Jesus does not invite the young aristocrat to repent of his sins and then ask that he allow Jesus to enter into his life in a personal relationship. Instead, Jesus tells him to keep the commandments, which the rich young man confesses he has kept since his earliest days. Then Jesus does the unexpected. Rather than simply accept the young man as a follower, Jesus tells him to sell all that he owns and distribute the money to the poor so as to gain treasures in heaven. Then he can follow Jesus. But when the rich young man heard this, he became full of sadness.

As the rich young man walks away, Jesus makes a disturbing pronouncement: “How hard it is for those having riches to enter into the reign of God. For it is easier for a camel to go through an eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter into the reign of God” (18:24–25). It appears that for the rich, Jesus determines salvation by how they interact with the poor. It is important to note that the term “poor” does not just refer to a lack of financial resources; instead, “poor” encompasses the inequality and injustice that accompany the lack of access to opportunities that the dominant culture takes for granted as a privileged right.

Yet some readers will turn to Ephesians, which clearly states, “For by grace you are being saved, through faith, and this not of

yourselves, it is a gift from God; not works, lest anyone should boast" (2:8-9). After all, Isaiah reminds us that "all of our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (64:6). How then can Jesus make the salvation of this rich young aristocrat conditional on his treatment of the poor? Often the dominant culture reconciles this apparent contradiction by employing a metaphorical reading. Such an interpretation recognizes the primary message of the story, which is that Jesus must be the center of every aspect of the life of the believer. All idols, whether they are riches *or something else*, status, family, ethnicity, and so on, must be relinquished. In this story, wealth just happens to be the idol of this young man. And his downfall was his unwillingness to abandon this particular idol. And the probable conclusion of the dominant culture is that the wealthy of today must also be willing to give up everything for Jesus but they don't *really* have to do it or radically change their lifestyles.

Yet, as previously discussed, the margins apply a different understanding; that is, they see Jesus literally connecting the salvation of the rich man with his response to the poor. Anyone who claims power and privilege, whether they come from maleness, whiteness, or economic class, forfeits his or her claim to God's eschatological promise, just like the rich young ruler. God's reign is not promised to those who are oppressors or benefit from oppressive structures. In fact, if they insist on their lifestyle, they have no place or claim to God's hope. In Luke 6:20-21 and 24-25, Jesus said that the poor are those who should be happy, for theirs is the reign of God. And what about those who do not produce the fruits Jesus sought in the life of the rich young ruler? Jesus says, "Already the axe is laid at the root of the trees; thus, any tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matt. 3:10). The internal salvific transformation caused by the grace of God is manifested publically by how the individual interacts with others, specifically those who are marginalized.

Believing in Jesus is insufficient for obtaining salvation. Does not the author of the letter of James warn us that even the demons believe in Jesus and tremble at his name?

My brothers and sisters, what profits those who say they have faith but do not have works? Is faith able to save them? If a brother or sister is naked and lacking daily food, and any one

of you says, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," but does not give them the necessities of the body, what is the profit? So also faith, if it has no works, is dead by itself. Yet one will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith without your works and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe God is one. You do well, but even the demons believe and tremble. But are you willing to know, O vain one, that faith without works is dead? . . . You see then that by works a person is justified, and not by faith alone. . . . For the body without spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. (2:14-20, 24, 26)

Concentrating solely on personal faith in Jesus Christ, divorced from actions of loving justice, encourages cheap grace. People from the margins insist that Christians move beyond an abstract belief in Jesus to a material response to those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, alien, sick, and incarcerated. The task for those seeking eternal life must go beyond an intellectual understanding of Jesus Christ to the actual doing of Christlike actions—not because salvation is achieved by those actions but because they serve as witness to the empowering grace given by God. To continue working Christ apart from any commitment to those who are the least contributes to maintaining our present structures of oppression along gender, race, and class lines. To ignore the cry of those who are marginalized is to deny Christ's message, regardless of whether or not we confess our belief in him and proclaim his name with our lips.

While people on the margins often connect the responsibility of those who benefit by the way society is structured with the process of salvation, those accustomed to a privileged lifestyle usually dismiss such a theological perspective. A faith solely based on individual belief and disconnected from public responsibilities and actions allows the rich young rulers of our time to claim to be followers and disciples. If the words of Jesus are as true today as they were two thousand years ago, then "how hard it is for those [of the dominant culture] to enter into the reign of God. For it is easier for a camel to go through an eye of a needle than for [those of the privileged center] to enter into the reign of God" (Luke 18:24-25).

More Than Just Climbing Sycamore Trees

It seems as if the author of Luke knew that readers would try to spiritualize the story of the rich young ruler. To counteract the attempt to harmonize the story of the rich young ruler with the lifestyle of today's wealthy, numerous homilies preached at prestigious congregations throughout this country have maintained that Jesus *really* did not mean to bind the salvation of the privileged with their actions toward the disenfranchised. Yet Luke 19:1–10 continues his Gospel by recounting the story of the rich sinner Zacchaeus.

According to Luke, Zacchaeus was a senior tax collector, a post that made him a very wealthy man. In the Roman Empire, contracts to collect taxes were farmed out to wealthy persons who in turn hired local residents, like Zacchaeus, to do the actual collecting of funds. These individuals became personally responsible for paying Rome its taxes, although they were provided with the power of Rome to collect extra taxes from the masses in order to make a profit. Theft and fraud abounded as tax collectors attempted to appropriate the maximum amount a person could bear. Their dealings with Gentiles made Jewish tax collectors ritually unclean, and their dealings with Rome made them collaborators with the occupying colonizers and traitors to their own people. While the rich young man was accepted by the people for his faithfulness in keeping the law of Moses and his membership in one of the leading families of the city, Zacchaeus was rejected because he did not keep the commandments and had unethically obtained his riches.

Consequently, Jesus surprised everyone, even Zacchaeus, when he stated that he would stay at his home. The crowd that surrounded Jesus began to complain, murmuring, "He is going to stay at a sinner's home." Zacchaeus, probably for the first time in his life, regained his humanity as Jesus accepted him. This internal empowering by God's grace was immediately manifested in his actions toward the poor. In 19:8 Zacchaeus exclaims, "Behold, half of my possessions I give to the poor, and if I cheated anyone, I restore it fourfold." How did Jesus respond? Jesus did not reassure him that this was not really necessary. Instead Jesus responded, "Today salvation has come to this house!" (19:9). Salvation

entered Zacchaeus' house when God's grace was manifested as actions toward the poor, when Zacchaeus publicly died to the power and privilege that had supported his lifestyle.

I Once Was Blind

Sandwiched between the story of the rich young ruler and the sinful tax collector is the short account of a poor blind man. This is not the only time the author of Luke provides meaning to an overall narrative by sandwiching in its midst a short and seemingly unrelated event. We must remember that the texts that eventually became part of the biblical canon did not have chapter numbering, verse breaks, or story headings when they were originally written. These were added afterwards. In other words, the end of Luke 18 does not signify a new and different story with the start of Luke 19. Instead, the story of two rich men, one acceptable to society and the other despised by society, is one complete narrative that serves to contrast the one liked but rejected by Christ with the one whom the reader thought would never make it yet was accepted by Christ. What separates these two men in their attainment of salvation? It seems to be their relationship and commitment, or lack thereof, with and to the marginalized.

Sandwiched in the midst of their stories is a short account (18:35–43) of a blind man begging by the side of the road. When he heard the crowd approach, he asked what was going on. The crowd informed him that Jesus the Nazarene was passing by. So he called out to Jesus, the Son of David, to have pity on him. Even though the people surrounding this beggar scolded him and insisted that he keep quiet, he shouted louder. When Jesus heard him, Jesus did not assume he knew what this blind man wanted, although it was obvious to everyone else that the blind man wanted to see. Instead, Jesus bestowed dignity on the man by having him speak for himself. (All too often, the dominant culture assumes that it knows what is best for the marginalized; hence it creates programs and begins projects to help the poor, never stopping to ask what kind of help those who are marginalized believe they really need!) In this case, the blind man requested his sight. Jesus responded, "Your faith has saved you."

The salvation of the poor and outcast is tied to their dependence

on Christ. The two rich men, who serve as bookends to this central message, were also asked to depend totally on Christ; because they had much, much was expected. It is easier for the poor, who have nothing, to imitate and follow the disenfranchised status of Jesus than for the rich to follow by disengaging from the security—even though it is false—of their wealth. The first man refused, preferring to depend on his own power and privilege, choosing to maintain a facade of religiosity by keeping the commandments. The second rejected his unethically earned status by committing himself to justice. He immediately began to dismantle the structures created to benefit him. Salvation ceases to be knowledge, recognition, or acceptance of God's incarnation in the personhood of Jesus; rather, salvation is linked to what Jesus did for the marginalized of his time and ours. Salvation is grounded in imitating the actions Jesus took toward bringing about liberation, not in the intellectual acceptance of a belief.

OF SHEEP AND GOATS

Matthew 25:31–46 describes the last day when the risen Christ will return to earth in all his splendor, escorted by the host of heaven, to take his seat on the throne of glory. All the nations will be assembled before him as he separates people from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep from goats. The sheep he will place on his right hand, and the goats on his left. Then the ruler of all will say to those on his right hand, "Come, you whom my Father will say to those on his right hand, 'Come, you whom my Father considers blessed, take for your heritage the reign prepared for you since the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was an alien and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me.'"

But to those on his left hand he will say, "Depart from me you cursed ones, to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons. For I was hungry and you never gave me food; I was thirsty and you never gave me anything to drink; I was an alien and you turned me out, naked and you never clothed me, sick and you never visited me." And when both the virtuous in prison and you never visited me." And when both the virtuous and condemned ask when they did these things to Jesus, Christ will respond, "Truly I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of these, the least of my people, you did it to me."

Jesus does not divide sheep from goats by their denominational affiliation, by the church they attended, or by their confession of faith. The litmus test is what they did or did not do to the least, to the poorest. Jesus asks if the individual participated in liberative acts that led others toward an abundant life or if he or she instead participated in enslaving acts that led others to death. He specifically asks if we fed the hungry, gave water to the thirsty, welcomed the alien, clothed the naked, visited the sick or the prisoner behind bars. The radicalness of salvation, as we already saw with the account of the rich young ruler and Zacchaeus, is that Jesus judges all people on how they interacted with the disenfranchised in society. The epistle of James best summarizes what awaits those who, like the rich young ruler, rely on their wealth and religiosity, ignoring the plight of the marginalized:

You who are rich, start howling and crying aloud over the hardships that are coming to you. Your wealth is rotted, and your garments have become moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and this same corrosion will be your sentence, eating your flesh as fire. You heaped treasures in the last days. Laborers who reaped your fields had their wages withheld by you, beheld their cries! The cries of those laborers have entered into the ears of the Lord of hosts. (On earth you lived luxuriously and lived notoriously. In the time of slaughter you are to your heart's content. You condemned, you murdered the just, who offered you no resistance. (5:1–6)

Our first reaction in reading the above text might be a sigh of relief. We may say that we are not rich but middle-class, and so this passage does not apply to us, it applies to those in a higher tax bracket: the Donald Trumps of the world. I will insist, however, that it does apply to the vast majority of those living in the so-called first world, including people on the margins. Specifically, many people residing in the United States live in a luxury unknown to the rest of the world and unfathomed by the aristocracy of any previous age. This is made obvious when we consider that the average yearly income is about \$330 in Kenya, \$300 in India, or \$160 in Bangladesh. In fact, the majority of the world's inhabitants, about three billion people, live on less than two dollars a day, with

thirty-four thousand children dying each day of hunger and preventable diseases. Living within the United States privileges its inhabitants, making the majority of them the equivalent of the rich young ruler when compared with the rest of the population that shares this planet.

The dichotomy between the privileged few in the industrial nations and the vast majority of the poor throughout the world has led Choan-Seng Song, a theologian from Taiwan, to ask how a church that profits from a rich and affluent society can find solidarity with a God who suffers and dies with the victims of global economic injustices? How can a church in an affluent nation like the United States follow the God of the crucified people? Eurocentric theologies fail to adequately answer, much less wrestle, with these questions.³ Through metaphorical rather than material readings, these questions are often dismissed. What liberative actions (praxis) are called for so that the rich young rulers of today can inherit eternal life?

Communal Essence of Justice

For people on the margins, seeking justice is an important component in being a Christian. Unfortunately, the concept of justice is sometimes lost when biblical texts are read in English. In English, the Hebrew and Greek terms that denote the concept of justice are usually translated as the ambiguous word "righteous" or "righteousness." Nevertheless, when Latina/os, for example, read biblical texts in Spanish, they discover that the concept of justice is retained in the translation of the word as *justicia*. Consequently, when Euroamericans read "righteous" or "righteousness" in their Bibles, Hispanics read "just" or "justice." Now, the word "righteous" implies an action that can be performed privately. Justice, however, can only be exercised in community, never in isolation. Justice can only manifest itself in relation to others. While a hermit can be righteous by remaining conscientious and God-fearing in thought, a hermit cannot practice justice in isolation because others are needed to whom justice can be administered. Instead of being a private expression of faith, justice becomes a public action, a public manifestation of God's acting grace.

By using the words *justo* and *justicia*, the Spanish translation

reinforces communalism as opposed to individualism. For example, the epistle of James tells us that "the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective" (5:16), that is, the one who is pious has his prayers answered. When we read the same verse in Spanish it is the prayer of the *just one* (the one doing justice within the community in obedience to God) that has much power. In English, Marthew quotes Jesus as saying, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (5:6). In the minds of most in the dominant culture, those who hunger and thirst for moral purity are the ones who will be rewarded. In Spanish, it is those who hunger for justice to be done to all members of the community, especially to the disenfranchised, and who thirst for justice against all oppressors, that God will fully satisfy.

The English text of Luke tells us of the centurion who, witnessing Christ's crucifixion, proclaimed, "Certainly this man was righteous" (23:47). Christ was the unsoiled innocent lamb who died for our sins. In Spanish, this same centurion says, "Certainly this was a just man." Christ was a just man who died an unjust death. The advice given in 1 Timothy in English reads, "The law is laid down not for the righteous but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinful, for the unholy and profane" (1:19). While the English-speaking reader is assured that the law does not apply to her or him because by faith in Christ he or she has been justified and is neither ungodly, sinful, unholy, nor profane, the Spanish reader understands the passage as stating that the individual practicing justice does not need the law, for the law is already internal and her or his actions are only an outward expression of inward conversion.⁴

To read the Bible from the margins becomes an act of faith derived from two sources: a marginalized location (reality) and a paradigm (ideal) derived by the community of faith, a model based on justice. The communal expression of faith avoids the Euroamerican pitfall of a utilitarian individuality that relegates religion to the private sphere, transforming the public Christ into a personal Savior. It is at the cross where reality and idealism intersect. Rather than attempting to define and explain the mystery of Jesus on a cross, those residing in the margins of society attempt to define themselves in light of this mystery. Conversion is not a call to a new religion founded by Jesus; it is a call to a radically subversive

lifestyle. Conversion constructs a life existence within a sacred space created both by reality and by the power of the ideal, a space transcending nature, the senses, and our ability to rationalize.

All too often, the social location of the poor, specifically their spirituality, is romanticized. Yet their salvation arises when their quest for liberation from oppressive structures intersects with the action (praxis) of Christ, who willingly hung from a cross. Salvation is found in solidarity with those on the margins who discover a Christ who is also marginalized and crucified. Hence faith becomes a special form of consciousness containing specific consequences for the will. Satisfaction of intellectual needs ceases to be the ultimate goal. Rather, the longing of the heart to answer the unanswerable questions caused by an existence alienated from the earth's resources becomes a religious quest for meaning.

ARE YOU SAVED?

Sin opposes God's benevolent purposes for creation and is responsible for the corruption of God's created order. Sin destroys fellowship with God and with other human beings, and thus it cannot be eradicated except by the unmerited redemptive love of God, received by faith and in communion with one another.⁵ Sin as alienation from God is manifested as injustice and oppression toward our fellow human beings. Scholars from the margins usually construct well-defined categories as to who are the perpetrators of injustices and who are the victims. However, there is also a tendency among some theologians on the margins to identify the sins of the dominant Euroamerican culture while overlooking the sins of their own communities, specifically their own brands of sexism, racism, and classism.

Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans "that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (3:23). The plight of those who live on the margins is glamorized when they are seen purely as being noble, devoid of sin. A danger exists of structuring the reality of those who are disenfranchised as only victims. If in fact, because they are marginalized, they then have nothing to confess and do not have a need to seek salvation, then we have romanticized their existence. Yet, even within marginalized groups, internal structures of oppression exist. If we define sin as injustice,

caused by broken vertical and horizontal relationships, then we are indeed all sinners. The broken horizontal relationship manifests the original broken vertical relationship with the Creator. Because sin is the source of social injustice and human oppression, it rejects fellowship with God, consequently causing a rejection of fellowship with other humans.⁶

God's reign can be understood as community; people created to live in a positive relation with the divine and with each other. The nemesis of this order is the reduction of individuals to their economic value. This is the basis of sin; hence the writer of 1 Timothy writes, "The root of all evil is the love of money" (6:10). Likewise, Amos observes that the love of money leads the powerful to "trade the poor for a pair of sandals" (2:6). Today person-to-person relationships are often abandoned for subject-to-object relationships. Those who are privileged by society, either consciously or unconsciously, transform everything, including humans, into objects for possession, domination, and domestication. As disposable objects, humans are measured by their production value, with the profit generated going to the one who controls these objects. This "praxis of domination" causes separation from God and separation within the community created by God.⁷

The cross does not exist for the earth's downtrodden to figure out why it is there or why Jesus had to hang from it. Rather, the cross exists to show the marginalized how their sufferings, their rejection by the privileged of society, and their death become the suffering, rejection, and death of God. Those who are disenfranchised can have faith in a God who intimately knows their pain because God experienced their pain, creating a solidarity with those who are oppressed.

Even those who benefit from oppression are welcome to participate in this solidarity!¹ Salvation for the dominant culture is linked to those who are oppressed. The crucified people become Jesus Christ in the here and now. Their suffering has the potential of redeeming the dominant culture by providing it with an opportunity to interact with Christ manifested in the lives and struggle of those living on the margins of society. As those with power die to their privilege and seek solidarity with those who suffer under oppressive structures, they begin to discover Christ.

In a culture that privileges those who are male, those who are wealthy, and those who are white, solidarity with Christ—who forsook his own equality with God to take the form of a human—requires Christ's disciples also to “take up their cross” and follow him. In short, it requires dying to whatever creates privilege and prevents solidarity with the crucified people of today. Salvation, as liberation, requires crucifying maleness, riches, and whiteness—in other words, the active dismantling of any social structure designed to privilege one group at the expense of another. For example, as a male, I recognize that society privileges me solely because I am male. All things being equal, I as male prevail over women in the marketplace and in the church community, whether I like it or not. Being a feminist and reciting pro-women rhetoric is insufficient as long as my *complicity with the status quo* continues to privilege me. Salvation for me, then, becomes linked to ending my old life, a life where I enjoyed the advantages of being male. I die to my maleness—that is, I crucify my old life—*only* by the praxis (actions) I undertake to dismantle the very structures designed to benefit me. Through this process of working to end not only my individual participation in oppression but also my society's participation in oppression, I work out my salvation “in fear and trembling.”

CHAPTER 7

Can't We All Just Get Along?

On March 3, 1991, a bystander videotaped the scene of four white Los Angeles police officers beating a subdued black man named Rodney King. Before that night, police brutality, a reality among people of color, was mostly ignored by the dominant culture, who refused to believe such things existed. Now the brutality was captured on tape and embedded in the nation's consciousness. To this day, the beating of Rodney King remains a symbol of police brutality and racial conflict.

A year later, the four officers responsible for the savage beating of Rodney King were acquitted. The suppressed anger of Los Angeles's disenfranchised community exploded with violence in one of the worst race riots ever to grip a U.S. city. By May 2, 1992, as the smoke from thousands of fires lessened, fifty-five people lay dead, 2,382 people were injured, and over \$1 billion in property damage had occurred. During the height of the violence, Rodney King went on television and uttered his now famous plea, “Guys, can't we all just get along?”

One of the political victims of the 1992 Los Angeles race riots was the police chief, Daryl Gates, who was eventually forced to resign. A decade later, reflecting on the events that led to the riots, Gates defiantly concluded, “[King] got whacked a few extra times [but he] brought it on himself.”¹ How can we get along when those who are placed in positions of power refuse to acknowledge that a problem exists? When the fault of police brutality is placed upon the victim, who brought the “whacking” upon himself? When no apology is given?

Still, Rodney King's plea for unity continues to haunt us today. Can't we all just get along? As long as the dominant culture refuses